

NOTES

TOLLE LEGE · NO. 01

*On Curiosity
and Studiosness*

THOMAS AQUINAS

Summa Theologiae II-II, Questions 166-167

A Tolle Lege booklet.
Designed by Eric Araújo.
Set in Libertinus Serif.
Printed, folded, sewn and trimmed by hand.
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On Curiosity and Studiousness

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II, Questions 166-167.

Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Second and revised edition, 1920. The translation is in the public domain.

The text follows the 1920 translation as published online at newadvent.org. A few transcription slips in the online text have been corrected; references and wording are otherwise unchanged.

Designed by Eric Araújo. Part of Tolle Lege, pocket classics to print, fold and sew yourself: ericaraujo.com/tolle-lege. This booklet may be freely copied and shared.

A SHORT GLOSSARY

Temperance. The virtue that moderates our desires for pleasure.

Intellective knowledge. Knowledge of the mind: ideas, truths, sciences.

Sensitive knowledge. Knowledge through the senses: what we see and hear.

Concupiscence of the eyes. From 1 John 2:16. Disordered desire to see and experience, the root of curiosity.

Detraction. Damaging someone's good name, even by true reports.

Inordinate. Out of order: aimed at the wrong thing, in the wrong way, or in the wrong measure.

Dionysius. An early Christian writer once identified with Dionysius the Areopagite of Acts 17.

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1. Aquinas calls the desire to know natural and good, and still says it needs moderating, like appetite for food. Where in your day does that desire run unmoderated?
2. In Question 167, Article 1 he lists four ways the desire to know goes wrong. Which one do you recognize most in yourself?
3. Augustine no longer went to the circus, yet a dog chasing a hare in a field could still pull him away from “some weighty thought.” What is your dog and hare?
4. According to Article 2, looking into other people’s lives can serve charity or can become detraction. Where is that line when you scroll?
5. Studiousness also fights the opposite vice: avoiding the trouble of learning. Where do you need more keenness, not less?
6. What would a studious week look like for you?

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a Dominican friar who taught in Paris, Naples and Rome. His *Summa Theologiae*, left unfinished at his death, is a long sequence of short questions, each broken into articles. The two questions printed here come from the part of the *Summa* on temperance, the virtue that moderates our desires.

That placement is the surprise. Aquinas treats the desire to know the way he treats the desire for food: it is natural and good, and for that very reason it needs to be ordered. The virtue that orders it he calls *studiositas*, studiousness. The vice that disorders it he calls *curiositas*, curiosity.

His “curiosity” is not the healthy wonder we praise in children and scientists. It is the restless craving to see and to know things that pull us away from what we ought to be attending to: the spectacle, the novelty, the neighbor’s faults. Studiousness, on the other side, is not only restraint. It is also the keenness to take up the hard work of learning what is worth knowing.

The text is eight centuries old. Read it slowly, with a pencil.

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Every article asks one question, phrased “Whether...” and answered yes or no. The parts always come in the same order:

Objections. Arguments for the answer Aquinas will *reject*. They are stated fairly, often strongly.

On the contrary. A single authority, usually Scripture or a Church Father, pointing the other way.

I answer that. Aquinas’s own answer and his reasons. This is the heart of the article.

Replies. A response to each objection in turn, usually granting what is true in it and showing where it goes wrong.

On a first reading, start with “I answer that,” then go back to the objections and replies.

References such as (II-II:166:2 ad 2) point to other places in the *Summa*: Second Part of the Second Part, Question 166, Article 2, reply to the second objection. “The Philosopher” is Aristotle.

for the sake of suffering annoyance, but out of the lust of experiment and knowledge.”

Reply to Objection 2. Sight-seeing becomes sinful, when it renders a man prone to the vices of lust and cruelty on account of things he sees represented. Hence Chrysostom says [Hom. vi in Matth.] that such sights make men adulterers and shameless.

Reply to Objection 3. One may watch other people’s actions or inquire into them, with a good intent, either for one’s own good—that is in order to be encouraged to better deeds by the deeds of our neighbor—or for our neighbor’s good—that is in order to correct him, if he do anything wrong, according to the rule of charity and the duty of one’s position. This is praiseworthy, according to Hebrews 10:24, “Consider one another to provoke unto charity and to good works.” But to observe our neighbor’s faults with the intention of looking down upon them, or of detracting them, or even with no further purpose than that of disturbing them, is sinful: hence it is written (Proverbs 24:15), “Lie not in wait, nor seek after wickedness in the house of the just, nor spoil his rest.”

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Reply to Objection 1. Lust and gluttony are about pleasures arising from the use of objects of touch, whereas curiosity is about pleasures arising from the knowledge acquired through all the senses. According to Augustine (Confess. x, 35) "it is called concupiscence of the eyes" because "the sight is the sense chiefly used for obtaining knowledge, so that all sensible things are said to be seen," and as he says further on: "By this it may more evidently be discerned wherein pleasure and wherein curiosity is the object of the senses; for pleasure seeketh objects beautiful, melodious, fragrant, savory, soft; but curiosity, for trial's sake, seeketh even the contraries of these, not

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Studiousness

ARTICLE 1

Whether the proper matter of studiousness is knowledge?

Objection 1. It would seem that knowledge is not the proper matter of studiousness. For a person is said to be studious because he applies study to certain things. Now a man ought to apply study to every matter, in order to do aright what has to be done. Therefore seemingly knowledge is not the special matter of studiousness.

Objection 2. Further, studiousness is opposed to curiosity. Now curiosity, which is derived from "cura" [care], may also refer to elegance of apparel and other such things, which regard the body; wherefore the Apostle says (Romans 13:14): "Make not provision [curam] for the flesh in its concupiscences."

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On the contrary, It is written (Proverbs 27:11): “Study wisdom, my son, and make my heart joyful, that thou mayest give an answer to him that reproacheth.” Now study, which is commended as a virtue, is the same as that to which the Law urges. Therefore studiousness is properly about “knowledge.”

I answer that, Properly speaking, study denotes keen application of the mind to something. Now the mind is not applied to a thing except by knowing that thing. Wherefore the mind’s application to knowledge precedes its application to those things to which man is directed by his knowledge. Hence study regards knowledge in the first place, and as a result it regards any other things the working of which requires to be directed by knowledge. Now the virtues lay claim to that matter about which they are first and foremost; thus fortitude is concerned about dangers of death, and temperance about pleasures of touch. Therefore studiousness is properly ascribed to knowledge.

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Now according to Bede (Comment. in 1 John 2:16) “concupiscence of the eyes refers not only to the learning of magic arts, but also to sight-seeing, and to the discovery and dispraise of our neighbor’s faults,” and all these are particular objects of sense. Therefore since concupiscence of the eyes is a sin, even as concupiscence of the flesh and pride of life, which are members of the same division (1 John 2:16), it seems that the vice of curiosity is about the knowledge of sensible things.

I answer that, The knowledge of sensible things is directed to two things. For in the first place, both in man and in other animals, it is directed to the upkeep of the body, because by knowledge of this kind, man and other animals avoid what is harmful to them, and seek those things that are necessary for the body’s sustenance. In the second place, it is directed in a manner special to man, to intellective knowledge, whether speculative or practical. Accordingly to employ study for the purpose of knowing sensible things may be sinful in two ways. First, when the sensitive knowledge is not directed to something useful, but turns man away from some useful consideration. Hence Augustine says (Confess. x, 35), “I go no more to see a dog coursing a hare in the circus; but in the open country, if I happen to be passing, that coursing

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The moderation of this desire pertains to the virtue of studiousness; wherefore it follows that studiousness is a potential part of temperance, as a subordinate virtue annexed to a principal virtue. Moreover, it is comprised under modesty for the reason given above (II-II:160:2).

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Reply to Objection 2. The act of a cognitive power is commanded by the appetitive power, which moves all the powers, as stated above (I-II:09:1). Wherefore knowledge regards a twofold good. One is connected with the act of knowledge itself; and this good pertains to the intellectual virtues, and consists in man having a true estimate about each thing. The other good pertains to the act of the appetitive power, and consists in man’s appetite being directed aright in applying the cognitive power in this or that way to this or that thing. And this belongs to the virtue of studiousness. Wherefore it is reckoned among the moral virtues.

Reply to Objection 3. As the Philosopher says (*Ethic. ii, 9*) in order to be virtuous we must avoid those things to which we are most naturally inclined. Hence it is that, since nature inclines us chiefly to fear dangers of death, and to seek pleasures of the flesh, fortitude is chiefly commended for a certain steadfast perseverance against such dangers, and temperance

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virtue, and ignorant of what God is, and of the majesty of that nature which ever remains the same, imagine they are doing something great, if with surpassing curiosity and keenness they explore the whole mass of this body which we call the world. So great a pride is thus begotten, that one would think they dwelt in the very heavens about which they argue.” In like manner, those who study to learn something in order to sin are engaged in a sinful study, according to the saying of Jeremiah 9:5, “They have taught their tongue to speak lies, they have labored to commit iniquity.”

Secondly, there may be sin by reason of the appetite or study directed to the learning of truth being itself inordinate; and this in four ways. First, when a man is withdrawn by a less profitable study from a study that is an obligation incumbent on him; hence Jerome says [*Epist. xxi ad Damas*]: “We see priests forsaking the gospels and the prophets, reading stage-plays, and singing the love songs of pastoral idylls.” Secondly, when a man studies to learn of one, by whom it is unlawful to be taught, as in the case of those who seek to know the future through the demons. This is superstitious curiosity, of which Augustine says (*De Vera Relig. 4*): “Maybe, the philosophers were debarred from the faith by their sinful curiosity in seeking knowledge from the demons.”

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On the contrary, Jerome (Comment. in Ep. ad Ephes. iv, 17) says: "Is it not evident that a man who day and night wrestles with the dialectic art, the student of natural science whose gaze pierces the heavens, walks in vanity of understanding and darkness of mind?" Now vanity of understanding and darkness of mind are sinful. Therefore curiosity about intellectual sciences may be sinful.

I answer that, As stated above (II-II:166:2 ad 2) studiousness is directly, not about knowledge itself, but about the desire and study in the pursuit of knowledge. Now we must judge differently of the knowledge itself of truth, and of the desire and study in the pursuit of the knowledge of truth. For the knowledge of truth, strictly speaking, is good, but it may be evil accidentally, by reason of some result, either because one takes pride in knowing the truth, according to 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge puffeth up," or because one uses the knowledge of truth in order to sin.

On the other hand, the desire or study in pursuing the knowledge of truth may be right or wrong. First, when one tends by his study to the knowledge of truth as having evil accidentally annexed to it, for instance those who study to know the truth that they may take pride in their knowledge. Hence Augustine says (De Morib. Eccl. 21): "Some there are who forsaking

for a certain restraint from pleasures of the flesh. 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 is a kind of restraint, and it is in this sense that it is reckoned a part of temperance. But as to the second inclination, this virtue derives its praise from a certain keenness of interest in seeking knowledge of things; and from this it takes its name. The former is more essential to this virtue than the latter: since the desire to know directly regards knowledge, to which studiousness is directed, whereas the trouble of learning is an obstacle to knowledge, wherefore it is regarded by this virtue indirectly, as by that which removes an obstacle.

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Curiosity

ARTICLE 1

Whether curiosity can be about intellectual knowledge?

Objection 1. It would seem that curiosity cannot be about intellectual knowledge. Because, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. ii, 6), there can be no mean and extremes in things which are essentially good. Now intellectual knowledge is essentially good: because man's perfection would seem to consist in his intellect being reduced from potentiality to act, and this is done by the knowledge of truth. For Dionysius says (Div. Nom. iv) that "the good of the human soul is to be in accordance with reason," whose perfection consists in knowing the truth. Therefore the vice of curiosity cannot be about intellectual knowledge.

Objection 2. Further, that which makes man like to God, and which he receives from God, cannot be an evil. Now all abundance of knowledge is from God,

according to Sirach 1:1, "All wisdom is from the Lord God," and Wisdom 7:17, "He hath given me the true knowledge of things that are, to know the disposition of the whole world, and the virtues of the elements," etc. Again, by knowing the truth man is likened to God, since "all things are naked and open to His eyes" (Hebrews 4:13), and "the Lord is a God of all knowledge" (1 Samuel 2:3). Therefore however abundant knowledge of truth may be, it is not evil but good. Now the desire of good is not sinful. Therefore the vice of curiosity cannot be about the intellectual knowledge of truth.

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