**Epistemic restraint and the vice of curiosity**

**[DRAFT ONLY – final revised version forthcoming in *Philosophy* 2012]**

**Abstract**

In recent years there has been wide-ranging discussion of epistemic virtues. Given the value and importance of acquiring knowledge this discussion has tended to focus upon those traits that are relevant to the acquisition of knowledge. This acquisitionist focus ignores or downplays the importance of epistemic restraint: refrainingfrom seeking knowledge. In contrast, in many periods of history, curiosity was viewed as a vice. By drawing upon critiques of *curiositas* in Middle Platonism and Early Christian philosophy, we gain useful insights into the value and importance of epistemic restraint. The historical discussion paves the way for a clarification of epistemic restraint, one that distinguishes the morally relevant features of epistemic *process, content, purpose,* and *context*. Epistemic restraint is identified as an important virtue where our epistemic pursuits pose risks and burdens, where such pursuits have opportunity costs, where they are pursued for vicious purposes. But it is in the social realm where epistemic restraint has most purchase, epistemic restraint is important both because *privacy* is important and because *being trusted* are important. Finally, some suggestions are offered as to why epistemic restraint has not received the contemporary attention that it deserves.

**Epistemic restraint and the vice of curiosity**

The pursuit of knowledge is rightly taken to be an important and valuable human activity. Given the importance of knowledge, and given that agents can be better or worse at acquiring it, it is no accident that our evaluative vocabulary picks out a range of valuable dispositions and traits of character that are relevant to acquiring knowledge. These traits and dispositions have been the object of considerable interest in recent years in virtue epistemology and epistemic virtue theory. Epistemic virtues include traits like *conscientiousness, open-mindedness, perseverance, attentiveness* and dispositions like basing one’s beliefs on *perception, memory, reasoning*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although there is considerable debate about what epistemic virtues are – and further debate as to how and whether epistemological or philosophical problems may benefit from being framed in terms of epistemic virtues – the standard conception of epistemic virtue is an *acquisitionist* one: epistemic virtues are traits and dispositions relevant to *acquiring* knowledge [[2]](#footnote-2) But this acquisitionist focus, whilst understandable given the aims of virtue epistemology and epistemic virtue theory, has left us with a partial and unbalanced conception of epistemic virtue. More specifically, the acquisitionist focus downplays or ignores the fact that there are virtues in *not* seeking knowledge; virtues in *not* trying to find out. The aim here is to begin the process of redressing this imbalance by identifying and expanding upon a range of virtues that fall under the heading of *epistemic restraint*.

**1. Epistemic restraint within acquisitionist virtue epistemology**

First it must be acknowledged that epistemic restraint – of a specific kind – has received a modest amount of attention within acquisitionist virtue epistemology. For example, James Montmarquet notes the importance of *intellectual sobriety.[[3]](#footnote-3)*  The intellectually sober inquirer will not be swayed by her excitement or love of knowledge into committing herself to the truth of propositions without evidence. This kind of intellectual sobriety shares a good deal with the state of character that Hookway refers to as being *epistemically* *continent*: ‘a state of character that ensures that we take heed of acknowledged reasons and maintain our rational commitments’.[[4]](#footnote-4) This notion of continence is discussed as part of an analysis of *epistemic* *akrasia:* the epistemic akratic agent commits herself to the truth of a proposition whilst at the same time knowing that she ought not to do so. The epistemically continent agent will refrain from committing herself to the truth of a proposition without good, relevant, reasons.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Whilst these are indeed virtues of restraint, there are two reasons why they are not the kind of epistemic restraint that will be our concern here. First, these virtues are, in effect, *doxastic* virtues: in each case, the virtuous epistemic agent is one who exhibits proper restraint in the formation of *belief*. The valuable end that such virtues serve is that of forming beliefs in a rationally proper way. But our focus is upon restraint with regard to the pursuit of knowledge. The second reason is that these traits count as virtues only insofar they are relevant to the *acquisition* of knowledge. Our focus is upon the question of whether there are virtues of *not* seeking to acquire knowledge.

Consider another example. Lorraine Code has drawn attention to a different virtue of restraint, one that is not just a matter of exhibiting restraint in one’s beliefs: *epistemic prudence*. Epistemic prudence ‘[i]nvolves judging which lines of enquiry it is prudent or imprudent to pursue, having a sense of one’s limitations, and being able to see the impossible difficulties certain lines of enquiry might bring about’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although this kind of restraint is unlike the doxasticrestraint noted above in some respects, it does share the acquisitionistfocus. Epistemic prudence is a virtue insofar as it allows an agent to better secure knowledge.

**2. The vice of curiosity and Christian doctrine[[7]](#footnote-7)**

In contrast, many thinkers throughout history have viewed epistemic restraint as an important virtue for reasons other than the fact that restraint might contribute to the *acquisition* of knowledge. For example, inthe Biblical account of The Fall (*Genesis* 3) God forbids the denizens of paradise to partake of the fruit that grants knowledge of good and evil. Eve cannot resist the temptation, and disobeys.[[8]](#footnote-8) God casts humanity from paradise into a life of damnation. Although the story of The Fall highlights a vice of *disobedience*, or a deficiency in the virtue of *respect for authority*, it is also clear that it is Eve’s epistemic traits of curiosity and inquisitiveness – her lack of epistemic restraint – play a role in that disobedience.

Curiosity, from the point of view of acquisitionist virtue epistemology, may seem to be an important epistemic virtue: without curiosity we would not be motivated to inquire, or to seek knowledge. But in The Fall, and in early Christian philosophy – Tertullian, Augustine and Aquinas – curiosity is identified as a vice. For example, for Tertullian, trying to gain knowledge of God other than via Christianity is a vice and may constitute heresy.[[9]](#footnote-9) Augustine’s *The City of God* – in line with Tertullian – contains wide-ranging critiques of various sacrilegiousforms of curiosity: in magic, Roman Gods, and the like. In his *Confessions* Augustine goes on to argue that curiosity about the natural world diverts us from a proper focus on God; and that curiosity undermines, or is at odds with, faith.[[10]](#footnote-10) ‘This malady of curiosity’ is the

reason why we proceed to search out the secret powers of nature – those which have nothing to do with our destiny – which do not profit us to know about, and concerning which men desire to know only for the sake of knowing. And it is with this same motive of perverted curiosity for knowledge that we consult the magical arts. Even in religion itself, this prompting drives us to make trial of God when signs and wonders are eagerly asked of him – not desired for any saving end, but only to make trial of him.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Augustine’s comments are underscored and developed by Aquinas – centuries later – in his *Summa Theologicae*.[[12]](#footnote-12) For Aquinas, *curiositas* is one of the three main categories of vice or sin (the others being *superbia* (pride) and *voluptas carnis* (sexual lust). Some people desire to find out about the natural world without framing their inquiry as revealing something about the nature of God. He cites Augustine: ‘we must not be moved by empty and perishable curiosity; but we should ever mount towards immortal and abiding things’. Aquinas also insists that some kinds of knowledge are not worth pursuing; he has a clear ranking of the value and importance of different kinds of knowledge. This raises the worry that someone may waste time pursuing the wrong kind of knowledge: he gives the example of a priest forsaking study of the gospels for reading ‘stage plays’.

But here curiosity seems to be a vice – and, correlatively, epistemic restraint a virtue – only against the backdrop of a range of specific theological commitments. If we assume that God – and God alone – is the proper source of valuable knowledge, then we may manifest disrespect if we seek valuable knowledge in others ways. Or, if God has prohibited seeking knowledge of certain kinds, then to seek that kind of knowledge is disobedient. Worse still, if we assume that God requires us to adopt a range of commitments *without evidence* – then to seek the knowledge that would be evidence in support of those commitments is to undermine trust in God. At this point we might conclude that curiosity is a ‘dead’ vice, at least for large sections of the modern world, insofar as these normative theological commitments are no longer shared. Just as virtues of piety and chastity are tied to specific normative and epistemological commitments which many in the modern world no longer share, so too is the virtue of epistemic restraint.

This brief historical line of reflection might seem to explain why epistemic restraint – other than the limited variants noted in the introduction – is absent from virtue epistemology. Epistemic restraint is absent from contemporary virtue epistemology and epistemic virtue theory for the same reason that piety is absent from contemporary (non-theistic) virtue ethics. But it would be a mistake to assume that the vice of curiosity has no purchase outside Christian – or other religious – doctrine. Augustine and Aquinas offer reasons in favour of epistemic restraint that are independent of their specific theological commitments. Furthermore, although Augustine and Aquinas’ critique of *curiositas* owes much to an older Abrahamic epistemic culture – where acceptance of God’s authority is central – they also draw upon a more wide ranging, nontheological, critique of the vice of *curiositas* in Middle Platonism.

**3. Plutarch and Apuleius on *curiositas***

Plutarch devotes one essay of his *Moralia* – a collection of essays on moral topics – to the theme of curiosity (*curiositas*).[[13]](#footnote-13) Plutarch draws an analogy between, on the one hand, a dwelling that is exposed to harsh elements or damp, and, on the other, the human soul, which can be disturbed by ‘several noxious qualities and distempered passions.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Among these distempered passions is ‘that sort of curiosity, which, by its studious prying into the evils of mankind, seems to be a distemper of envy and ill-nature.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Plutarch offers a well-observed list of the kinds of places curiosity may lead us. The (viciously) curious – *curiosi* – have an (unhealthy) interest in:

the downfalls and sudden deaths of great men, the rapes and defilements of women, the treacheries of servants, the falseness of friends, the arts of poisoning, the fatal effects of envy and jealousy, the ruin of families, dethroning of princes, with many other such direful occurrences as may not only delight and satisfy.’[[16]](#footnote-16)

The curious will ‘much frequent the monster-market, looking after people of distorted limbs and preternatural shapes, of three eyes and pointed heads.’[[17]](#footnote-17) In a social context, the curious man – Plutarch’s *curiosi* are all male, whilst the objects of their curiosity are often female – is *prying* and *intrusive*, he ‘cannot forbear prying into sedans and coaches, or gazing at the windows or peeping under the balconies, where women are.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Even adultery is cast as essentially bound up with a lack of epistemic restraint: ‘adultery is nothing else but the curiosity of discovering another man’s secret pleasures, and the itch of knowing what is hidden; and curiosity is (as it were) a rape and violence committed upon other people’s privacies.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

Plutarch’s *Moralia* are essays on moral instruction and self-improvement, offering advice and instructions as to how to rid oneself of *curiositas*. Plutarch’s reflections provide the basis for an (at the time) popular treatment of *curiositas* by the Algerian Platonist Apuleius, in his 2nd Century Latin novel *The Golden Ass*.[[20]](#footnote-20) The picaresque tale is a cautionary one, about a man – Lucius – whose curiosity to learn magic leads to him view a naked witch’s incantations, which, in turn, leads to his being turned into an ass and suffering a range of (comic) humiliations). The critical evaluation of *curiositas* is developed twice over in the novel, once in the trials of Lucius, and once again in a story within the novel: *The Golden Ass* contains the first extant record of the legend of Cupid and Psyche.[[21]](#footnote-21) This tale within a tale also involves a critique of *curiositas* (Cupid is forbidden to try to find out Psyche’s true identity – she succumbs to the epistemic temptation; later in the story, Psyche – Pandora like – cannot resist the temptation to open a box retrieved from Hades when instructed by Zeus not to do so).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Although Tertullian, Aquinas and Augustine go beyond Plutarch and Apuleius, and align a critique of *curiositas* with Christian doctrine, aspects of the earlier nontheological critique remain visible. For example, in the *Confessions* Augustine relates how he was interested in gossip and trivia, and in finding out about false Gods. In Book 10 of the *Confessions* he introduces the idea of the ‘lust of the eyes’ (*concupiscentia oculurum*): a curiosity that led him – like those who frequent Plutarch’s monster-market – to gaze at corpses, or at circus freaks. Had Augustine been writing today he may have made reference to the familiar phenomenon of *rubbernecking*: where drivers or pedestrians strain to look at the aftermath of car accidents. Augustine makes it clear that talk of the lust of the eyes is not restricted to visual perception, but is meant to apply more generally to the pursuit of knowledge. The ‘malady of curiosity’ noted earlier that led those lacking in faith to seek ‘signs and wonders’ is also ‘the reason for all those strange sights exhibited in the theater’.

Similarly, Aquinas’ critique of curiosity is not as simple as a demand for faith. Aquinas is keen to stress that it is not the pursuit of knowledge per se that is vicious or sinful – ne approvingly cites the opening line of Aristotle’s Metaphysics which began our discussion. Aquinas identifies *studiositas* (studiousness) as a virtue. *Studiositas* and *curiositas* differ in morally relevant ways. First, Aquinas notes ‘we must judge differently of the knowledge itself of truth, and of the desire and study in the pursuit of the knowledge of truth’. That is, the *motive* for epistemic pursuits are of key relevance to their moral status. For example, some may seek knowledge in order to further their pride (‘Knowledge puffeth up’), others may seek knowledge for vicious ends (‘those who study to learn something in order to sin are engaged in a sinful study’). Aquinas also refers to a variant of the epistemic prudence noted earlier: a person should not try to overreach themselves, or discover things beyond their capacity.

Our second line of historical reflection clearly shows how the theological critique of *curiositas* is only a part of the story. Plutarch’s *Moralia* points us towards phenomena which are part of contemporary life – prying, shallow, busybodies with an interest in other people’s private affairs, in trivia, in others’ weakness or failings, a fascination with death, injury and ‘freaks’. Relatedly, Apuleius’ tale picks up on the *dangers* of unbridled curiosity, and Augustine and Aquinas view curiosity as a vice for a variety of reasons (not all of which are essentially bound up with their theological commitments). In the remainder of this paper the aim is to show that the vice of *curiositas* – and the correlative virtue of epistemic restraint – is still very much of contemporary importance.

**4. Epistemic risk and vicious epistemic purposes**

We noted, above, the activity of *rubbernecking*. Rubbernecking increases the risk of crashing and contributes towards a (needless) increase in traffic delays.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rubbernecking illustrates a more general point, that the pursuit of knowledge can put the inquirer, or others, at risk of various harms, or pose burdens or costs for them.[[24]](#footnote-24)

But we need to be careful here to clarify what it is about an epistemic pursuit that poses a risk or generates a cost? A simple example will help. Suppose Tom wants to find out whether substance X is poisonous.[[25]](#footnote-25) He ingests a small amount of it. It is poisonous and he suffers terribly. What is it about the epistemic pursuit that harms the inquirer? Here we need to distinguish between epistemic *content* (that which the agent seeks to find out) and epistemic *process* (the means by which she seeks to find it out).[[26]](#footnote-26) When we consider the risks and dangers associated with epistemic pursuits, process and content are often tightly intertwined and easily conflated. In our example of Tom and the poison we might express our concern by saying ‘Why on earth did he try to find out *whether that stuff was poisonous*?’ But it is not the *knowing* that harmed him, or coming to know *that*, it is, rather, the *process* by which he came to know: a process which put poisonous materials into his body. Had Tom ingested the substance unwittingly, without seeking or gaining knowledge, the effect would have been the same. On the other hand, Tom might have found out the same thing – gained the same epistemic content – via another process (by, say, consulting a pharmacopoeia). Tom’s epistemic pursuit was dangerous because the *process* was dangerous.

In other cases, although the epistemic process is relevant to a consideration of the viciousness of the act, the *content* may seem to be more important for our evaluation of curiosity than in the poison example. To return to rubbernecking, suppose Tom is driving past a recent car crash where paramedics are tending the injured. He captures a glimpse of the bloodied, broken, face of a (dead) child. For days Tom is haunted and distressed by what he has seen, coupled with additional feelings of remorse and self-disgust at his voluntary curiosity. But, once again, we must be careful: whilst the content is indeed important here, we cannot disregard the process. His *seeing* puts him in touch with the world in a distinctive way. Although Tom learns that a child has been killed, it is not the knowledge *per se* that distresses him, but the fact that he has *seen* something shocking. Had Tom learnt of that fact by, say, reading the evening newspaper, he would not have been so distressed. Here the process of acquiring knowledge, in a sense, emotionally involves Tom in the horror of the crash – makes the suffering and carnage intimate, as it were – in a way that simply learning of a fact does not.

In other cases, epistemic pursuits pose a danger because *other parties* have an interest in certain facts remaining unknown. Plutarch notes the parallels between the risk of testing medicinal herbs on oneself (as with our example above) and prying into the affairs of the powerful:

For as to him that will be curiously examining the virtues of medicinal herbs, the unwary taste of a venomous plant conveys a deleterious impression upon the brain, before its noxious quality can be discerned by the palate; so they that boldly pry into the ills of great persons usually meet with their own destruction, sooner than they can discover the dangerous secret they enquire after (p. 429)

The hacker who hacks into secret government files, or the secessionist journalist who pries into the financial affairs of a Russian oligarch, may put herself at serious risk.[[27]](#footnote-27) Here, once again, both process and content are relevant. The *content* is relevant because powerful parties do not want anyone to find out certain things; the *process* is relevant because some processes by which we acquire knowledge are more revealing than others: breaking into the oligarch’s *dacha* in full view of his CCTV system may be more revealing than monitoring his conversations at a distance with sophisticated audio equipment.

It should be clear, then, that the pursuit of knowledge can put the inquirer at risk. But this fact is clearly independent of the theological commitments that shape Augustine and Aquinas’ critique of *curiositas*. The virtuous agent will not needlessly put herself, or others, at risk by her epistemic pursuits: she will exhibit *epistemic caution*. The qualification *needlessly* is important here. Epistemic caution cannot be viewed in isolation from the possession of other virtues. Consider the routine Hollywood plot device where an action hero is caught breaking into an office trying to find out important facts about corruption/terrorism; the hero is then subjected to torture/imprisonment, only to escape and wreak well-choreographed vengeance upon his captors. Although the epistemic pursuit put the agent at risk, these plot devices need not be an illustration of vicious epistemic recklessness. They may be meant to illustrate *courage* or *selflessness* (especially if the risky epistemic pursuit is engaged in for valuable ends: to save the world etc).

In general, epistemic restraint cannot be viewed in isolation from other virtues, and, because we are focusing on epistemic actions, epistemic restraint will require *practical* wisdom (*phronesis*): the wisdom and expertise that allows the virtuous agent to reconcile different virtues, and to identify what courses of action to follow in a way that is sensitive to the demands of the particular context of action.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Not only may an agent put herself (needlessly) at risk, she may put *others* at risk from seeking knowledge. The *process* may do so: the discovery of ionizing radiation posed (then unknown) risks to, not just scientists, but those who worked in or near their laboratories. Such risks were unknown and unanticipated. In other cases the risks are clear. For example, the scientists of the Japanese military Unit 731 sought to learn how biological agents might be best used as a weapon by testing anthrax, bubonic plague and other agents on Chinese civilians in World War II. In many cases knowledge was gained via vivisection, without anaesthetic, of men, women, children and babies: this knowledge was deemed to be of such potential value that it gained the scientists clemency from their US captors, and their freedom after the war.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The contrast between the radiation example and Unit 731 is that the *purposes* are clearly more vicious in one case than the other. Aquinas notes that an agent’s *motives* for her inquiry are central to its moral evaluation: ‘those who study to learn something in order to sin are engaged in a sinful study.’ The purposes of an epistemic pursuit are, to a degree, independent of the content and process. For example, suppose Brad and Tina are both engaged in the same type of epistemic pursuit, aimed at the same epistemic content. Suppose also that the *process* does not itself harm anyone (they are doing pure research without human subjects). They are both trying to find out whether substance X causes pain if ingested. But Brad and Tina differ with regard to their motives and purposes. Brad is a government chemist in a military state working for the brutal security services trying to develop a more effective means of torturing captives, by way of a state policy of terror: he seeks something that causes excruciating pain, but without leaving evidence. Tina, by way of contrast, is working on a cure for bowel cancer, there is evidence that substance X may be helpful, but she is concerned that there may be painful side-effects. Here, even though the process by which knowledge is sought does not harm anyone by itself, we might argue that Brad exhibits a deep moral failing: he is seeking to find something out for vicious purposes.

**5. Opportunity costs and the (relative) value of knowledge**

Not only are the purposes, and risks, of an epistemic pursuit of relevance to virtuous action, the virtuous agent will be sensitive to the *opportunity costs* of her epistemic pursuits. The pursuit of knowledge is an activity that takes up time and resources, time and resources that could be deployed for other activities. Consider two examples.

1. Tom wants to use his spare time to raise finance for building a children’s hospital in Malawi. However, Tom is an overly inquisitive person and spends most of his spare time on social networking sites learning what his friends are doing. The finance is never raised.
2. Mary, a gifted, though colour-blind, scientist, wants to learn all there is to know about colour perception. She is, unfortunately, much more curious about the minutiae of celebrity lifestyles than the theory of vision. She spends most of her waking hours reading celebrity magazines.

What, if anything, is the moral failing or deficit in these examples? One failing seems to be that the (trivial) epistemic pursuit *undermines* or *precludes* a more valuable one. In (1) Tom’s epistemic pursuits preclude his acting towards achieving a valuable *nonepistemic* end (the building of the hospital); in (2) Mary’s epistemic pursuit undermines a valuable *epistemic* end (securing a theory of colour perception).

But now we must take care. For, in some sense, both Mary and Tom value the trivial epistemic pursuit to such an extent that they pursue it in favour of something else. At this point, one option is to consider the *agent’s own* evaluative perspective on her epistemic pursuits. Suppose Tom is sincerely committed to raising funds for the hospital. His failing might be viewed as a lack of *epistemic economy* (he is simply very poor at recognising the opportunity costs of his trivial pursuits, or in allocating his limited resources well). An agent with the trait of epistemic economy will be able to effectively and efficiently allocate her limited epistemic resources. But this moves us onto a second kind of failing. Tom may suffer from a kind of *epistemic akrasia*: weakness of the will. Unlike the *doxastic* akrasia noted earlier – where agents fail to commit themselves to the truth of propositions whilst having the capacity to recognise that they *ought* to do so – the akrasia here is a variant on familiar practical akrasia, where an agent fails to do that which she evaluates as worth doing.

But we can assess the failing as something other than some kind of *internal* problem in resource allocation or weakness of the will. For Plutarch, Augustine and Aquinas, one of the reasons why *curiositas* is a vice is that agents may seek the *wrong kind* of knowledge and here it is the epistemic content that is pivotal. As Thomas S. Hibbs puts it in his discussion of Aquinas: ‘[the] vice of curiositas consists precisely in an excessive attention to less noble inquiries or objects of knowledge; it sets up a partial and subordinate object of the mind as if it were the whole and highest object’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Hibbs goes on to note that ‘The ethical appraisal of the intellectual virtues shifts our attention from the object or content of the acts of knowing to their nature as acts of a human being and even more broadly to the way these acts contribute to a way of life’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

But this is where our modern sensibilities may be at odds with those of our historical thinkers. We might, for example, accept the *contrastive* claim that the pursuit of knowledge of celebrity lives is *less worthy* than the pursuit of certain kinds of scientific knowledge, but this does not commit us to the view that learning of celebrity lives is *without worth*. If we transform our examples above so that Tom and Mary engage in their trivial epistemic pursuits in their spare time, in order to relax, would we hold that they ought not to do so? Indeed, our conception of a well balanced life is one that has a place for relaxation and idleness.

Is there any sense in which certain epistemic *contents* are such that the virtuous agent will not seek to know them? It might seem not, and that the idea that there is knowledge that should not be sought *because it is knowledge of this or that type of fact*, has no currency in the modern world, except insofar as the considerations of process, purpose and opportunity cost are relevant. But this would be mistaken, for there is a broad and important domain of facts – facts about individual persons – for which epistemic restraint is a particularly important social virtue.

**6. Privacy and epistemic restraint: avoiding nosiness, snooping, and prying**

Each of us has a reasonable interest in ensuring that certain facts – facts about our medical history, about our political views or religious commitments, about our sexual orientation or about our intimate and personal relationships – do not become *known* by others without our consent. Such interests are part of our privacy interests and are typically referred to as *information* (or *informational*) privacy interests.[[32]](#footnote-32) Standardly discussion of the normative import of such interests in framed in terms of information privacy *rights*. There is a great deal that can be said about such rights, and about whether the notion of informational privacy rights makes sense. But here, given our focus on epistemic restraint, we must narrow our concerns. What we can do is draw upon discussion of the considerations that are meant to *justify* privacy rights, as a basis for further clarifying the value and importance of epistemic restraint.

We have been assuming that virtues are traits that promote or sustain valuable ends, especially those ends which are relevant to human flourishing. Charles Fried notes how information privacy is essential to the development of the individual as a moral being capable of intimacy, trust and friendship.[[33]](#footnote-33) James Rachels accepts, but expands upon Fried’s argument, noting that the various ways that breaches of privacy can undermine us, harm us, embarrass us, or put us at other social risks.[[34]](#footnote-34) For the sake of argument, let us assume that we have a range of interests in information privacy, and that respect for information privacy is a valuable end, one that contributes towards the development and maintenance of relationships that are important for human flourishing.

Even with such a simple, underdeveloped, acknowledgement of the *value* of privacy it does not take much work to see how epistemic restraint is a valuable trait in social contexts. Once again we have to be careful to pinpoint *which* aspects of an epistemic pursuit might be wrongfully invasive or intrusive. We have noted that epistemic pursuits differ in their *content, process, and purpose*. One further element that we have not highlighted so far is that, not only can one and the same content be acquired by different processes; it can be acquired *intentionally* or *unintentionally*. Consider some examples:

1. Tom is a nosy, inquisitive, busybody. He hates his neighbour Jerry. He breaks into Jerry’s house, reads Jerry’s diary, and finds out that Jerry has cancer.
2. Tom is a nosy, inquisitive, busybody. One hot evening Tom notices that Jerry has left his window open, and is talking in an agitated way on the phone. Tom quickly goes out, stands in his own yard outside the open window, in order to overhear the phone call. He learns from this that Jerry has cancer.
3. Tom is a nosy, inquisitive, busybody. He hates his neighbour Jerry. He tries to read Jerry’s emails on his computer screen, from the vantage point of his loft. It is unsuccessful.
4. Tom sees Jerry smoking heavily every day, out in the street. One day Tom is at the local hospital visiting a relative. He sees Jerry leaving the oncology ward looking very distressed. Tom infers – in this case correctly – that Jerry has cancer.
5. Tom is told, unbidden, by a gossipy neighbour, that Jerry has cancer.
6. Tom is a police officer investigating a murder. He breaks into Jerry’s house (Jerry has disappeared since the night of the murder). He finds Jerry’s diary to see if there any clues. In passing, he finds out that Jerry has cancer.

In (1) Tom acts wrongly in a variety of ways: he intrudes upon Jerry’s personal space, and gains personal information that Jerry has an interest in keeping private. In (2) however, Tom learns nothing, but acts wrongly nonetheless: he fails to exhibit the epistemic restraint necessary to respect Jerry’s privacy interests. In (3) Tom does not intrude upon Jerry’s private physical space, but fails to exhibit epistemic restraint. But note that the *content* learned in (1) and (2) might be known without any wrongdoing, as (4)-(6) show. In (4) and (5) the key is that Tom does not intend to find out the private personal facts. In (6) the police officer’s actions are intentional, but are justified (arguably) by the *purposes* for which that knowledge is sought.

In our everyday evaluative vocabulary being *nosy* is a social vice.[[35]](#footnote-35) To cast someone as *nosy* or *prying* is pejorative; similarly, the labels *busybody*, *eavesdropper, Nosy Parker, Peeping Tom*, and *snoop,* all have pejorative uses. We can make sense of the pejorative sense of these terms by referring to the virtue of epistemic restraint: the Nosy Parker *lacks* appropriate epistemic restraint and is motivated to find out facts that a more virtuous agent would not be disposed to find out. Plutarch has little respect for the nosy person:

a person of this prying busy temper, [will] forcibly intrude himself as a spy into the indecencies of private families; and he pries into those very things which locks, bolts, and doors were intended to secure from common view, for no other end but to discover them to all the world. Aristo said that those winds were the most troublesome which blew up one’s garments and exposed one’s nakedness; but these inquisitive people deprive us of all the shelter or security of walls and doors, and like the wanton air, which pervades the veil and steals through the closest guards of virgin modesty, they insinuate into those divertisements which are hidden in the retirements of the night, and strip men even to their very skin

As noted earlier, for Plutarch) ‘curiosity is [. . .] a rape and violence committed upon other people’s privacies’.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In our contemporary world we tend to think of the protection of privacy interests in terms of various privacy *rights*. There is much more that can be said about how a rights-based conception of information privacy contrasts with a virtue-based one. We cannot expand on this here.[[37]](#footnote-37) The point to highlight from a focus on privacy is that it gives us a clear reason for epistemic restraint that is *content* based (rather than process, purpose or opportunity cost based). This it not to say that considerations of process and purpose are irrelevant, as our examples above show, but it is the *content* that leads the way. Insofar as a domain of private facts is of value to human flourishing and valuable aspects of human life, then social virtues of epistemic restraint will be an important contributor to such valuable ends.

**7. Epistemic restraint in a social context**

Our discussion of information privacy has highlighted the importance of one agent’s epistemic pursuits for other agents. The focus above was on how learning – or even seeking to learn – facts about other agents may undermine privacy. Our epistemic pursuits have other social implications. Our discussion so far has made use of the distinction between *content, process,* and *purpose*. To this trio we need to add the *social context* of acquisition. We acquire knowledge *from* others and our epistemic pursuits are (often) observable by (and evaluable by) others. A brief fictitious narrative about someone who lacks a sensitivity to the importance of the social context of his epistemic pursuits will help us introduce the point.

On Monday, Vicious Tony attends the funeral of Tom’s young daughter. Tom is clearly distraught. But Tom is an expert on C18 German porcelain and Vicious Tony wants to find out whether his Meissen figurine is worth as much as he hopes. He sees a good opportunity to gain knowledge, so, without consideration of Tom’s distress, Tony proceeds to ask Tom a range of detailed question about his figurine.

Later, Tony, Sheila, and their friends are at a restaurant. Tony wants to find out what the court judgement was with regards to Sue’s recent trial for theft. He asks loudly, in front of the others ‘So Sheila, how did your trial for theft go last week?’

The following day, Tony accompanies his (long suffering) wife to hospital. He says that he will wait patiently for her, though he has no watch. He quickly becomes irritated and asks each person he sees ‘What time is it, come on, what time is it?’ in an agitated way.

On Wednesday Tony and his wife go to the theatre, leaving a friend’s teenage daughter to look after their ten year old boy. Tony fails to see the play, spending most of the performance telephoning the babysitter to ask her questions about what she is doing, and to see if what she says is consistent with the streaming video feed from the hidden camera he has installed at home.

Throughout this brief narrative Tony seeks, and may even acquire, knowledge. But the manner in which he does so *given the context* is vicious. At the funeral his epistemic pursuits are inconsistent with the virtues of compassion and sympathy. In the restaurant, the context in which knowledge is sought allows others to come to believe certain things about Sheila, causing her to lose ‘face’ (and perhaps worse). Unless there were compelling reasons to humiliate Sheila in this way (and it is hard to see what they might be) Tony clearly acts in a vicious way, in a way that is inconsistent with empathy and respect for Sheila. His constant time checking is inconsistent with patience and his interactions with the babysitter are inconsistent with trust.

These examples have something in common with what Julia Driver has called the *virtues of ignorance*.[[38]](#footnote-38) Some virtues – like modesty – require the possessor to be ignorant of certain things (in the case of genuine modesty the agent must be, in a sense, ignorant of her true self-worth). Driver’s focus is on *states* of ignorance, rather than *restraint* with regard to seeking knowledge. Even so, Driver’s virtues of ignorance direct us towards one way in which we can think of epistemic restraint as a virtue: where the *pursuit* of knowledge would be inconsistent with the possession of other virtues. Indeed, the examples in our narrative above share something with the discussion of privacy where the epistemic actions of the nosy, prying, agent are inconsistent with important social virtues of respect for others.

**8. Conclusion**

The aim here was to introduce – or, more correctly, *re-*introduce – the virtue of epistemic restraint. Although certain kinds of restraint have been discussed in virtue epistemology, they are primarily species of *doxastic* restraint – restraint with regard to forming beliefs without due support – and, second, are viewed as virtues primarily insofar as they serve the end of *acquiring* knowledge. Turning to Abrahamic doctrine and early Christian philosophers we found a critique of *curiositas* with a correlative appeal to the virtue of epistemic restraint: the virtuous person does not seek knowledge of certain kinds. This seemed to tie epistemic restraint to a normative context that many in the modern world do not share (though many do) and, as such, seems to place epistemic restraint in the same position as virtues of piety or chastity. But further reflection took us back to Plutarch’s *Moralia* and its wide ranging critique of nosiness, pryingness and vicious epistemic pursuits. Plutarch’s discussion of *curiositas* provides material for Apuleius, Tertullian and Augustine and Aquinas. The vice of *curiositas* is not solely confined to the Christian theological context. Our discussion has shown that even though our world has changed considerably over the past two millennia, there are still good reasons for agents to exhibit epistemic restraint. Our epistemic pursuits may pose risks or dangers, to ourselves or others. Here it may be the process, the content, or a combination of both, that poses the risk (although this does not imply that no risks should ever be taken in the pursuit of knowledge). Knowledge can be acquired for vicious purposes, and even when it is acquired for innocent purposes, agents ought to be aware of how such knowledge might be used by others. We then saw that the value of the pursuit of this or that epistemic content can be ranked against the value of pursuing other epistemic content; epistemic pursuits can also be ranked against other nonepistemic pursuits. Where a specific epistemic pursuit would undermine or preclude the achievement of a more valuable end, epistemic restraint is called for.

This raised the question of whether there are kinds of knowledge – considered as kinds of *content* – that the virtuous agent will not pursue. The importance and value of our privacy interests provide us with a domain where epistemic restraint has a key role to play. The virtuous agent will not disrespect others, or undermine their privacy, by her prying or snooping. The social context of the acquisition of knowledge provides us with a broader range of considerations that are relevant to epistemic restraint: acquiring knowledge from others may disrespect them, it may be expressive of a lack of trust. But this brings us full circle, as it were, back to the kinds of consideration that concerned Augustine. Augustine notes how the ‘malady of curiosity’ motivates us to seek ‘signs and wonders’ as evidence of God, rather than relying upon faith or trust. Even contemporary atheists cannot but acknowledge the importance of trust and faith, if not in God, in one another. Trusting – and *being trusted* – are essential elements of human flourishing, but trust demands epistemic restraint.

If there are so many reasons for exhibiting epistemic restraint, why has it been of so little concern in philosophy, especially given the recent interest in epistemic virtues? Why has epistemic restraint, of the kind outlined here, been so neglected? There are a number of reasons for this. First, as noted earlier, contemporary virtue epistemology is primarily concerned with those virtues that are relevant to the *acquisition* of knowledge. Epistemic restraint simply fails to register as something of value. A second reason why epistemic restraint is underdiscussed may be the esteem which epistemic pursuits are held, especially by those parties who would be best placed to engage in critical evaluation of curiosity. Many, if not most, philosophers view themselves as seeking knowledge, and assume that the pursuit of knowledge is a good thing (even if most, when asked to reflect on it, could readily produce a list of cases or contexts where it would not be a good thing to seek knowledge). A third reason why curiosity may fail to register as a vice, at least with regard to prying, intrusive curiosity, is the contemporary focus on privacy *rights*. Thus, rather than attending to the virtues that agents need to have in order to ensure respect for privacy, the focus is on rights, and the institutional and regulatory mechanisms by which they can be protected. Finally, the fourth reason is that epistemic restraint may seem to be tied up with a theological anti-scientism, or perhaps various forms of *anti-intellectualism*.[[39]](#footnote-39) This leads us onto broad, and wide ranging, questions about the political dimensions of knowledge and virtue. If we hold that human life can be improved, or that scientific knowledge can liberate, or improve the lot of, the oppressed, we may view epistemic restraint as an expression of reactionary epistemic conservatism. A plea for epistemic restraint, especially when directed at the pursuit of *scientific knowledge*, may unite, amongst others, far right Christian fundamentalists, the Taliban, New Age Spiritualists and Eco-Anarchists, albeit for different reasons.

But we should not conflate reflection on the value of epistemic restraint with a dismissal of, or opposition to, valuable scientific pursuits. What we do need is a clear framework for thinking about *why* knowledge is worth pursuing (we should not simply assume that all knowledge is worth pursuing), and about whether or not knowledge is *in fact* something that ought to be pursued in this or that context, in this or that way, by this or that person, for this or that reason.

1. In *reliabilist* virtue epistemology the focus is on cognitive dispositions and faculties (perception, inference, memory, and so on) that correlate with the *sources* of knowledge in traditional epistemology. In contrast, *responsibilists* virtue epistemologists lay stress on the development of the character traits that are relevant to being a good epistemic agent, one who is capable of engaging in rational inquiry in the pursuit of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example: ‘An *epistemic virtue* is an excellence of character instrumental to the acquisition of true belief and knowledge’ Jonathan Dancy in *A Companion to Epistemology* ed. By J. Dancy, E. Sosa and M. Steup. (Oxford Blackwell 2010), p. 343; ‘An epistemic virtue is a special kind of intellectual virtue, one that is conducive to producing epistemically valuable states of affairs’ Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Ourselves and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Christopher Hookway, ‘Epistemic Akrasia and Epistemic Virtue’ in *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility* by Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski (New York: Oxford Universty Press, 2001), 178-199 (p. 195). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Similar points can be found in John Heil, ‘Doxastic Incontinence’, *Mind* **93** (1984), 56-70; David Owens, ‘Epistemic Akrasia’, *The Monist* **85** (2002), 381-397. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover: University Press of New England and Brown University Press, 1987), p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This section is indebted to P.G. Walsh ‘The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity (Plutarch to Augustine)’, *Greece & Rome,* 35 (1988), 73-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 3:5 ‘Eve erred in not regulating the measure of her knowledge by the will of God [. . .] we all daily suffer under the same disease, because *we desire to know more than is right*, and more than God allows.’ (emphasis added, cited in Harrison) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Op. cit. note 7, p.81. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Augustine *Confessions and Enchiridion* trans. Albert Cook Outler (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955),Book X, Chapter xxxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Op. cit. note 10,p. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. All Aquinas references are to the online version, http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3167.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Moralia,* Essay 39, Book VI. The essay title – *De Curiositate –* has been translated in various ways: ‘On not minding your own business’, ‘On Being a Busybody’. Quotations here are from the translation by W. Goodwin ‘An over busy inquisitiveness into things impertinent’ in *Plutarch’s Miscellanies and Essay* Vol. 2 (Boston: Little Brown, 1878). We shall use *curiositas* for curiosity in the pejorative sense (i.e., the kind of curiosity that Plutarch, and others, identify as vicious). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Op. cit. note 13,p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Op. cit. note 13,p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Op. cit. note 13,p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Op. cit. note 13,p. 437. The ‘monster market’ is where deformed and disabled slaves were sold. Many were bought and kept as curiosities or pets. The value of deformity was, bizarrely, so high, that some children were deliberately disabled. For a discussion, see Carlin A. Barton *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans:The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 86. Barton relates how curiosity was viewed by Romans as motivated by envy and malice, with metaphors of cannibalism (feasting one’s eyes on another). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Op. cit. note 13,p. 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Op. cit. note 13,p. 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Vincent Hunink, 'Plutarch and Apuleius', in: Lukas de Blois, Jeroen Bons, Ton Kessels, Dirk M. Schenkeveld (edd.), *The statesman in Plutarch's works*. Vol. I: *Plutarch's statesman and his aftermath: political, philosophical, and literary aspects*. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 251–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The tale is one which has held considerable appeal over the centuries, being re-told or adapted by amongst others, Milton, Spenser, Wordsworth, Keats, and C.S. Lewis. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Aurelius stresses how Lucian remains in the grip of *curiositas* even when turned in to an ass. See Joseph G. DeFilippo, ‘Curiositas and the Platonism of Apuleius' Golden Ass’, *The American Journal of Philology* **111** (1990), 471–492 (p. 476). Hunink (op. cit. note 20) notes the irony in *The Golden Ass*: Lucius’ vice of curiosity is identified as a heredity one, but Plutarch is identified as Lucius’ ancestor, implying, to the knowing reader, that Plutarch, the author of a critique of the vice of curiosity is likely to have suffered from the vice himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jonathan P. Masinick and Hualiang Teng, *An analysis on the impact of rubbernecking on urban freeway traffic*. http://www.gmupolicy.net/its/pdfweb/Impact%20of%20Rubbernecking.pdf; see also Victor L. Knoop, Henk J. van Zuylen and Serge P. Hoogendoorn, ‘Microscopic Traffic Behaviour near Incidents’ *Transportation and Traffic Theory* (2009), 75–97. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rubbernecking may also be intrusive and distressing for those in accidents—we return to issues of privacy and curiosity below. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Plutarch cites this kind of example in order to illustrate the general point that epistemic pursuits can be dangerous. (op. cit. note 13,p. 429). Such examples are not fanciful: e.g., see Lawrence K. Altman, *Who Goes First? The Story of Self-Experimentation in Medicine* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The proper semantic framework for talking of epistemic pursuits is one that deploys *interrogative content clauses*. Such clauses use a range of interrogative (rather than relative) pronouns in *indirect questions*. We talk of people seeking to find out *where, when, why, who, which, what for, whether* and so on. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. E.g., the journalist Anna Politkovskaya. (see http://www.economist.com/node/8023316) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Linda Zagzebski, Virtues of the Mind (Cambridge University Press, 1996) gives a clear account of how *phronesis* is relevant to the *acquisitionist* epistemic virtues. (Part II, Chapter 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For a grim catalogue of the activities of the many hundreds of scientists and doctors in Unit 731, and the shocking way in which clemency was granted by their US captors in exchange for their research results, see Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932–45 and the American Cover-Up*. (London: Routledge, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Thomas S. Hibbs, 'Aquinas, Virtue, and Recent Epistemology' *The Review of Metaphysics* **52 (**1999), 573–594 (p. 589). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Op. cit. note 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The contrast is drawn between (a) our interests in ensuring that knowledge of certain kinds of fact about ourselves remain unknown by others (unless we will it); (b) our interests in ensuring that our bodies, or space, or possessions are not violated, intruded upon, or used by others (unless we will it). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Charles Fried, ‘Privacy’, *Yale Law Journal* **77** (1968), 475–493. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. James Rachels, ‘Why Privacy is Important’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **4 (**1975), 315–322. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Edward Shils outlines how a blend of bourgeois and Puritan ideals in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century helped shape a culture of privacy in the US. ‘Privacy: its constitution and vicissitudes’, *Law and Contemporary Problem*  **31 (**1966), 281–306. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Op. cit. note 13,p. 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. I do so in ‘Information privacy and epistemic restraint’ (draft in progress) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Julia Driver,‘The Virtues of Ignorance’, Journal of Philosophy **86** (1989), 373–384. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. E.g. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, in The Social Contract and Discourses by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, (1750) trans. G.D. H. Cole (London: Dent and Sons, 1923). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)