Augustine and the Virtue of Studiositas

Scott B. Dermer
Southern Methodist University: Perkins School of Theology
Master of Divinity Student

I. Introduction

It is commonly assumed in modern intellectual life that curiosity is virtuous. Curiosity stimulates the pursuit of knowledge. The curious mind is inquisitive, intrigued, and characterized by an insatiable desire to learn. Most would agree that curiosity is something to be respected and cultivated as an intellectual habit. Augustine, however, would repudiate such modern assumptions. For Augustine, curiositas is a vice which deflects one from the ultimate aim of life—happiness in the one true God. Curiosity is one part of Augustine’s triad of sin: “For all that is in the world is the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes [curiosity], and the pride of life.”¹ For Augustine, the opposite of curiosity is studiositas. As a virtue, studiousness directs one to the happy life in God. The purpose of this paper is to examine the virtue of studiousness in Augustine’s work. I will begin by contextualizing studiousness within Augustine’s eudaimonistic account of human life and his Christological account of virtue. I will then provide an exegetical assessment of curiosity and studiousness in Augustine’s writings. Lastly, I will suggest that Augustine’s distinction between the vice of curiosity and the virtue of studiousness makes a positive contribution to all scholars, ministers, and laity who desire to cultivate good intellectual habits.

II. Ordered Love and The Supreme Virtue

In order to properly understand the virtue of studiousness, it is first necessary to attend to Augustine’s larger account of virtue and vice. Augustine’s most fundamental treatment of the virtues is found in his anti-Manichaean treatise, On the Morals of the Catholic Church. In this text, Augustine sets forth a distinctively Christian account of eudaimonism, that is, an account of how virtue relates to the ultimate aim of life—happiness. Augustine begins this text with the general observation that all people

desire to live happily. Several years later in the *City of God*, Augustine would claim that the desire to live happily is the reason for all philosophy: “For man has no other reason for philosophizing than that he may be happy.”² For Christians and pagans alike, happiness is the telos of human life in general and intellectual activity in particular.

What then is the happy life, according to Augustine? Augustine argues that the happy life is loving and possessing the supreme good. Augustine begins identifying this supreme good with two negative statements. Firstly, the supreme good cannot be anything inferior to the human being, for in seeking an inferior good the human being becomes inferior. Secondly, the supreme good cannot be lost against the will, for truly enjoying a good precludes the fear of losing it. What then is superior to humanity which cannot be lost against the will? The soul is a good superior to the body, for it supplies the body with life; however, Augustine maintains that it is not the chief good of humanity. There is something which comes before the soul and brings the soul to perfection; namely, virtue. Virtue, however, is ultimately the disposition of the soul, the consequence of the soul following after the supreme good. Augustine concludes, “God then remains, in following after whom we live well, and in reaching whom we live both well and happily.”³ Thus, for Augustine, that which is to be loved and possessed as the supreme good is God, and the happy life is found in nothing other than God:

> Following after God is the desire of happiness; to reach God is happiness itself. We follow God by loving Him; we reach Him, not by becoming entirely what He is, but in nearness to Him, and in wonderful and immaterial contact with Him, and in being inwardly illuminated and occupied by His truth and holiness. [The] greatest commandment, therefore, which leads to happy life, and the first, is this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind.” *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, 11.1

The only thing which leads to the happy life and the possession of the supreme good is love of God. Virtue is not the supreme good; rather, God is the supreme good whom is to be loved and enjoyed for his own

---


sake. Virtue, then, can be described as that which orders one’s love of the supreme good; it regulates one’s love so that the supreme good may be attained; it brings the soul’s love to perfection. For Augustine, virtue is properly understood only within the larger framework of the ultimate goal of life—happiness in the one true God which comes by way of loving God.

The role of charity in Augustine’s conception of virtue is not an insignificant matter; it is, in my assessment, what makes his account of the virtues thoroughly Christian. Eric Gregory has helpfully suggested that the human being in Augustine’s thought is a “bundle of love.” In Augustine’s anthropology, the self relates to the world in terms of her various loves. The effect of Adam’s fall is that the self’s various loves are disordered. Simply put, in a fallen world we are bad lovers. We love certain things either more or less than we ought. Thus, the virtuous person in Augustine’s ethics is the person who loves God and others well. Virtue is, in fact, “perfect love of God.” What Augustine means by this must be unpacked carefully.

Here it is instructive to turn to another early text of Augustine—*On Christian Teaching*. In this text Augustine makes a crucial and oft-contested distinction between “use” and “enjoyment.” For Augustine, the world consists of two things—things that are to be “used” and things that are to be “enjoyed.” To enjoy something is to love it for its own sake; to use something is to apply it to the purpose of possessing what one loves. For Augustine, only the eternal and unchangeable Trinity is to be enjoyed and loved for his own sake. In a fallen world, however, our loves have gone wrong. We enjoy temporal and changeable things in and of themselves. Further, we use temporal and changeable things with no

---

4 Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 15.22 and 19.3. Here Augustine defines virtue as “the order of love” and “a wisely regulated life.”


6 Augustine, *On the Morals of The Catholic Church*, 15.25

reference to loving/possessing God. A mother, for example, enjoys her son on his own account, that is, she enjoys her son with no reference to her enjoyment of God. For Augustine, this enjoyment is disordered and ultimately false. The mother is placing the responsibility of constituting the happy life on a temporal creature, a responsibility that no temporal creature can fulfill. The result of such inordinate love—a love which is ultimately self-love—is restlessness.  

Augustine allows for humans to enjoy one another, yet only in as much as they are enjoying one another in God. Love is perfected when things or creatures are enjoyed and used only in reference to God. In a fallen world, human loves must be perfected, that is, they must be related to, directed to, and ordered to God, not self.

Augustine says that the inhabitants of the city of God sing “Order love within me.” This is a cry for virtue. The citizens of the eternal city ask God to order their love, for they recognize that only God can order their love in and through God’s own love. Therefore, virtue is fundamentally a gift from God; it is dependent upon divine agency. Disordered love is the result of human pride in the fall. It is only in and through God’s initiative in the humble and incarnate Christ that human beings are healed of pride and made capable of virtue. In sum, Augustine describes the just and holy person as someone who has “ordered his love, so that he does not love what it is wrong to love, or fail to love what should be loved, or love too much what should be loved less.” For Augustine, the perfect lover is someone whose various loves are ordered to their proper end—enjoyment of God. Vice then is disordered love: an enjoyment and use of things with no reference to the enjoyment of God.

---

8 One thinks of the pathological love of the mother who pleads with an angel for the opportunity to reunite with her son in heaven in C.S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce*. This mother’s love is disordered in the Augustinian sense. She enjoyed her son on his own account, and now she must hear the painful news that “human beings can’t make one another really happy for long.” Here Lewis captures the essence what Augustine means by disordered love and the “restless heart.” See C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperCollins, 1946), p. 99.

9 Augustine, *City of God*, 15.22


11 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 10.59
Another way to talk about virtue is in terms of vision. In the *Soliloquies*, Augustine describes the virtuous person as one who sees rightly. For Augustine, the senses of the soul are located in the eyes. Like our loves, however, these senses are disordered. In order for the senses of the soul to operate correctly, the soul is in need of three things: to have eyes, to look, and to see, each of which corresponds to faith, hope, and love, respectively. Through faith, hope, and love the eyes of the mind are directed to the contemplation of God. For Augustine, “a right and perfect act of looking, that is, one followed by vision, is called virtue.”

Virtue exists when the mind possesses sound eyes, sees, and looks well. Virtue, it can be said, turns the eyes of the soul from hankering after temporal things to contemplating eternal things. This turning toward the eternal is possible only when faith, hope, and love are present in the soul:

Faith, whereby the soul believes that thing, to which she is asked to turn her gaze, is of such sort, that being seen it will give blessedness; Hope, whereby the mind judges that if she looks attentively, she will see; Charity, whereby she desires to see and to be filled with the enjoyment of the sight. The attentive view is now followed by the very vision of God, which is the end of looking… *Soliloquies*, 1.13

Virtue ultimately leads one to a beatific vision. Perfect virtue consists in the soul looking attentively upon God, and the soul enjoying the object of vision. As James Wetzel aptly describes it, in Augustine “vision transforms human desires to align them with the object of vision, the good.”

Wetzel’s statement captures the thrust of Augustine’s discussion of virtue: when the gaze of the soul is directed to the supreme good through faith, hope, and love, the inordinate and disordered desires of the soul are healed by the object of vision. Virtues direct the eyes to God alone, and virtue expresses the “powers of perception and volition” being “appropriately coordinated.”

Thus, a person is virtuous when love is ordered to its proper end or when the gaze of the eyes (i.e., all the senses or desires of the soul) are fixed upon the supreme good.

---

12 Ibid., 1.13


14 Ibid., 14.
Ordered love and perfect vision are made possible by God’s gracious activity in the humble and incarnate Christ. Augustine’s conception of the virtues is thoroughly Christological. Christ is not purely an example of virtue, but is, in the words of George Lavere, “the fullness of virtue realized concretely and made accessible to the world…”15 The Christocentricity of Augustine’s virtue ethics is on display most clearly in his reflection on the words of Psalm 84: “Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.”16 Augustine describes the “highways to Zion” as steps that are placed in the heart by God’s grace, steps upon which Christians must ascend by loving God. When one ascends the steps of the heart through grace, one goes from “virtue to virtue.”17 It is by grace that many virtues are given: the first set being the gifts of the Spirit and the second set being the cardinal virtues. These divinely-given virtues allow one to rise the steps of the heart to God. These virtues are not, however, the ultimate telos of the steps. From these many virtues people must move on to the supreme virtue which is Christ. Christ is “the virtue of God and the wisdom of God.”18 Through God’s initiative in Christ, the virtues are made accessible to human beings. The virtues lead one to the contemplation of the supreme virtue himself: “From these virtues we mount unto that other virtue. And what will that be, but the virtue of the contemplation of God alone…the God of Gods, Christ of the Christians…?”19 Thus, for Augustine, the virtues are a God-given means by which humans move on to the contemplation of the supreme virtue of God—Christ. Augustine quite tellingly entitles this psalm the “Psalm of degrees.”20 The title indicates that


16 Ps. 84:5


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 84.10
the soul’s movement toward God in virtue is gradual and progressive. As Jennifer Herdt rightly observes, Augustine assumed that Christians “put on virtue in a gradual process of habituation best understood as ‘putting on Christ,’ as an imitation of Christ’s example through which we are brought into participation in Christ’s virtue.” Christ is the way and the goal, that is, he is not only the means to a virtuous life, but the end of the virtuous life.

What virtues feature most prominently in Augustine’s work? Faith, hope, and love are virtues—they are indispensable for “right and perfect looking.” The classical doctrine of the cardinal virtues is also pivotal for Augustine. Augustine, however, adapts this doctrine by interpreting the virtues in terms of Christian charity. Temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence signify four forms of love:

Temperance is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it. *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, 14.25

The cardinal virtues are unified by nothing other than charity, and each virtue is a form of charity. Furthermore, there is a proportional relationship between virtue and love: “Is it not true that, the more love exists in a man the more he is endowed with virtue, and the less love he has the less virtue is in him, for love is itself virtue; and the less virtue there is in a man so much more vice will there be in him. Therefore, where love is full and perfect, no vice will remain.” Thus, virtue can be possessed to greater or lesser

---

21 Ibid.


24 There is, however, no Thomistic distinction between infused and acquired virtues. All virtues, for Augustine, are infused by divine love.


degrees, depending on the amount of love that exists in a person, and also the extent to which love is properly ordered to the enjoyment of God. Augustine’s work on virtue demonstrates the primacy of charity: virtue is the “order of love” and “perfect love”; charity itself is a virtue; and charity unifies all of the other virtues.

Vice is disordered love. In the *City of God*, Augustine describes vice as an “injury to nature.” Vice hurts natures by “depriving them of integrity, beauty, welfare, virtue, and, in short, whatever natural good vice is wont to diminish or destroy[,]” In short, vice is a privation of virtue, like evil is a privation of good. God did not create one’s nature with vices. Even the wicked angels who departed from God were created with good natures. Vice diminishes one’s good nature. Like sin, it originates in the human will and, in certain cases, can evolve into a chain which binds one in habit. In *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine states that according the “principle of contrariety,” human vices are treated by the example of Christ’s virtues. According to this principle, the vice of curiosity is healed only through imitation of and participation in Christ’s exemplary studiousness.

How then should the vice of curiosity and the virtue of studiousness be categorized among the major virtues? For Aquinas, the desire for knowledge can become inordinate and thus it must be tempered. Therefore, Aquinas placed studiousness under the larger umbrella of temperance. Though Augustine does not systematically categorize the sub-virtues, I believe he too locates studiousness under temperance, for studiousness is fundamentally about restraining the inordinate intellectual appetite. To this Augustinian vice and virtue we now turn.

27 Augustine, *City of God*, 7.1
28 Ibid.
29 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.29
31 The virtue of studiousness is not as extensively discussed in Augustine’s works as is curiosity. Thus, what Augustine means by studiousness must be constructed mostly by attending to his negative treatment of its opposite.
III. Curiosity and Studiousness

The concept of curiosity in Augustine’s writings possesses a complexity—indeed a richness—which is indicative of Augustine’s prolific intellectual development as a philosopher, theologian, and bishop.32 The breadth of the concept is expressed by Augustine himself: “Now how wide is the scope of curiosity!”33 My aim in this section is to identify the most basic features of the vice, so that its opposite can be understood more clearly. By looking at a variety of texts, I will attempt to answer two basic questions: what is curiosity and why is it a vice?

In his *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Augustine exhorts his flock to “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world,” for all that is in the world is “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”34 Resisting his former Manichaean tendency to disvalue creation, Augustine asks the biblical writer, “Why am I not to love what God made?”35 Augustine’s answer is emphatic: it is not misguided to love what God has made, for all things in the world are created by God and are good. What is destructive is to take your enjoyment from temporal things and not from the eternal Creator. To lust with the eyes is to use created things in such a way that “you set your affections upon them for blessedness.”36 In a most basic sense, curiosity—deftly described by James O’Donnell as the “hankering of the eyes”—is an inordinate affection of a temporal thing.37

---

32 Joseph Torchia suggests that the complexity of *curiositas* in Augustine’s work demonstrates his uneasiness about the concept: “He frequently seems uncertain about its import, groping for an adequate explanation of its role in the soul’s defection from God.” I think the complexity is due more to Augustine’s unsystematic style as well as his polemical and pastoral purposes rather than his own uncertainty. See N. Joseph Torchia, “*Curiositas* in the Early Philosophical Writings of Saint Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies* 19 (1988), p. 111.


34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid. 2.10

Curiosity is predominately associated with pagan practices such as the magical arts and the theatre. Curious persons participate in such practices for simply sensational reasons. Curiosity also tempts people to test God by working miracles. This kind of curiosity is connected to pride, that is, the desire to make oneself great and honorable by means of a special religious power. Jesus himself subjugated curiosity when he refused to cast himself down from the temple to have the angels rescue him. Augustine exhorts his flock to hold fast to the love of God, so that they too might subjugate the desire to captivate people’s attention through experimentation in miracle working.

Augustine uses a variety of images to describe curiosity. In *On Genesis Against the Manichees*, he allegorically links curiosity to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Just as man was placed over the cattle, serpents, and birds, so Christ rules over obedient souls who come to the church. Each creature signifies a lust that must be conquered by Christ. The cattle signify carnal desire, the serpents “dark curiosity,” and the birds pride. The punishment meted upon the serpent is that he has to eat the earth all the days of his life. For Augustine, eating the earth signifies the temptation of curiosity: “for one who eats the earth penetrates the deep and dark, but nonetheless temporal and earthly.” This is, as Joseph Torchia notices, a particularly apt description of the Manichaeans. The Manichaeans are “earth bound, intent on that which is lowest in the hierarchy of creation, their vision of eternal Truth clouded by the opacity of spatio-temporal images.” The idea that curiosity is bound to the temporal is also seen in Augustine’s other allegorical image for curiosity: “Behold too the fish of the sea, that is, the curious; who walk through the paths of the sea, that is, search in the deep after the temporal things of this world: which, like the paths of the sea, 

---

38 Augustine’s critique of the theatre is ambivalent. On one level, the theatre provides bad examples for imitation. On another level, the theatre is experientially perverse because it allows one to find pleasure in an actor’s suffering. For an example from Augustine’s own experience of theatre, see Augustine, *Confessions*, 2.6. For an account of Augustine’s critique of the theatre, see Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, pp. 61-66.


40 Augustine, *On Genesis Against the Manichees*, 2.18.27

41 Torchia, p.114.
vanish and perish, as quickly as the water comes together after it has given room." Like the serpent who eats the earth, the fish who search in the deep have an intellectual appetite for only temporal things. This appetite is perverse, for it desires to know the temporal reality in and of itself. Curiosity is the insatiable thirst to know about temporal things with no reference to the eternal and higher things of God. It is vicious because it turns the soul away from the contemplation of superior, eternal things to inferior, temporal things.

The vice of curiosity manifests itself in certain intellectual habits. In the *City of God*, Augustine accuses Numa of attaining the secrets of demons by an “illicit curiosity.” In *On Christian Teaching*, he states that the magical arts, divination, astrology, and various other pagan superstitions are “brim-full of dangerous curiosity, agonizing worry, and deadly bondage.” The fundamental flaw of such practices is that they “are not publicly promulgated by God in order to foster the love of God and one’s neighbor.” In *Against Faustus*, Augustine indicts the Manichaeans for their incessant, curious desire to be novel in doctrine: “they praise their own falsehoods as new, as if all that is new must be good, and all that is old bad.” For Augustine, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. The Manichaeans’ dissatisfaction with the “old” and their desire for novelty causes them to abandon these treasures and commit doctrinal error. As Paul Griffiths suggests, the need for novelty contributes to the “obsessiveness

---

42 Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms*, 8.11

43 The narrative of Augustine’s repudiation of Manichaean materialism can be found in Book VII of the *Confessions*. Augustine himself was unable “to conceive of any but material realities.” Augustine, *Confessions*, 5.11. His eventual adoption of Neo-Platonism enabled him to, as Rowan Williams argues, “de-spatialize” his notions of God and evil. See Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, eds. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 120-121.

44 Augustine, *City of God*, 7.34

45 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 2.92

46 Ibid., 2.90. Emphasis added.

and insatiability of curiosity’s appetites.”48 Novelty is antithetical to “contemplative rest,” for the curious mind seeks an object simply for its novelty, and then moves quickly from that object to another, hoping to satisfy its disordered appetite.49

In the Confessions, Augustine reflects upon the difficulty of obeying the divine command to be continent from the hankering of the eyes. Augustine states that the eyes are delighted by many things: bright colors, apparel, shoes, vessels, and diverse images. Augustine recognizes the goodness of such things, nevertheless, he prays: “suffer not these to take possession of my soul; let God rather possess it, He who made these things ‘very good’ indeed; yet He is my good, not these.”50 The hankering of the eyes is unceasing and Augustine can only resist it by raising his eyes to the Creator of all things. Augustine proceeds to give a detailed account of the nature of curiosity:

There pertains to the soul, through the same senses of the body, a certain vain and curious longing, cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning, not of having pleasure in the flesh, but of making experiments through the flesh. This longing, since it originates in an appetite for knowledge, and the sight being the chief among the senses in the acquisition of knowledge, is called in divine language, “the lust of the eyes.” Confessions, 10.35.54

This text is striking on two accounts. Firstly, curiosity has a deceptive quality: it is hidden under the name of knowledge and learning. The great danger of curiosity is that it is a vice which seems to pass as a virtue. Secondly, curiosity is experimental: it is an appetite to know something by way of trial. Augustine likens it to the desire to look at a mangled corpse simply for the sensation of horror or sadness. Curiosity revels in the experience of discovering something new via experimentation.

In his autobiography, Augustine investigates the many ways in which he is daily tempted by curiosity. A dog chasing a hare in the field distracts him from a serious thought and a lizard snatching a fly captivates his attention. Even though these small creatures eventually cause him to praise the Creator, it is

49 Ibid.
50 Augustine, Confessions, 10.34.51
nothing other than curiosity which originally causes his eyes to gaze upon them. Such examples might be dismissed as simply the idiosyncrasies of this ancient figure, or they can be viewed as illuminating examples of how curiosity reveals itself. The curious mind is distracted. The eyes are constantly moving from object to object, ruling out any possibility of steady contemplation.

In his seminal work on Augustine and curiosity, Paul Griffiths argues that the most central feature of curiosity is that it privatizes knowledge. To make knowledge private is to deny that all truth participates in God’s being. Because all things are sustained by and participate in God’s being, all things are public and in common. Curiosity aims to take that which is in common (knowledge of a certain thing) and make it private, and this results in “a misprision, in reduction of the being of what is expropriated by removing it from participation in what supremely is and treating it as something that exists by itself and can be known by itself.”51 When the mind makes something privately subject to itself, “[it] turns and begins to move and slip gradually down into less and less.”52 In other words, when the mind seizes knowledge for itself, the knower, as well as the thing known, experience ontological loss. Consequently, the curious mind is left unsatisfied and thus it must move on to something else. In sum, curiosity is a disordered appetite for knowledge. It is the desire to know temporal things deeply with no reference to the eternal and supreme good. It is characterized by the sensation of experimentation, novelty, pride, distraction, restlessness, and the privatization of knowledge. Simply put, to be curious is to “desire nothing but to know.”53

This disordered appetite for knowledge—the “hankering of the eyes”—must be ordered by the virtue of studiousness. Humanity’s perverse desire for knowledge must be restrained by studious discipline. Augustine writes, “the soul with the virtues make war upon error and inborn vices, and

51 Griffiths, p. 55.


53 Augustine, Confessions, 10.35.57. Emphasis added.
conquers them by fixing its desires upon no other object than the supreme and unchangeable good." The virtue of studiousness conquers the vice of curiosity ultimately because it directs the soul’s desire for knowledge to the supreme good. The virtue, in my terms, is best understood as an ordered intellectual appetite that is characterized by humility, holding truth in common, sustained inquiry, love of learning, and using knowledge for love of God and neighbor.

In the Confessions, Augustine reflects on his experience of reading liberal arts books as a young student. Although he understood these books, in the end he gained no advantage from them: “I read them with pleasure, but I did not know the real source of truth and certain facts as they contained. I had my back to the light and my face was turned toward the things which it illumined, so that my eyes, by which I saw the things which stood in the light, were themselves in darkness.” In this text, the young (and curious!) Augustine acknowledges that his studies were ultimately futile because his eyes were not turned toward the source of truth. In his autobiography, turning toward the light was a profound intellectual and emotional conversion to the humble and incarnate Christ. For Augustine, the life of studiousness becomes possible when one acknowledges the humble and incarnate Christ as the source of all knowledge and wisdom. In On the Trinity, Augustine reflects on this divine source:

Therefore Christ is our knowledge, and the same Christ is also our wisdom. He Himself implants in us faith concerning temporal things, He Himself shows forth the truth concerning eternal things. Through Him we reach on to Himself: we stretch through knowledge to wisdom; yet we do not withdraw from one and the same Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge." On the Trinity, 13.19.24

This text demonstrates that virtuous appetite for knowledge involves clinging to Christ, for Christ himself is knowledge and wisdom. It is only in and through clinging to the Word made flesh that the mind can be

---

54 Augustine, City of God, 19.4

55 Augustine, Confessions, 4.16

56 For Augustine, knowledge and wisdom are distinct yet related. Knowledge is “rational cognizance of temporal things” and wisdom is “intellectual cognizance of eternal things.” The former belongs to action (using things well), and the latter belongs to contemplation. Augustine says that humans are to ascend from knowledge to wisdom, so that they can contemplate the eternal and superior things. See Augustine, On the Trinity, 4.14.21-4.15.25
illumined by God. The studious mind sees Christ as the source of knowledge—it humbly submits to Christ as the teacher of all truth.  

The studious mind also recognizes that the truth is common to all. Again, the curious mind seeks to make knowledge private. The curious revel in the ownership of new knowledge, and they pride themselves in knowing something that others do not. The studious, however, humbly recognize that any truth is the “common property of all lovers of truth.” In the Confessions, for example, Augustine acutely recognizes that some people love their interpretation of a given biblical text because it is true, yet others love it because it is their own. For Augustine, if an interpretation is true, then it is not someone’s own property, but it is rather common to all: “Your truth is not mine alone nor does it belong to this man or that. It belongs to us all, because we hear your call to share it and you give us dire warning not to think it ours alone, for fear that we may be deprived of it.” The virtue of studiousness tempers the prideful desire to possess knowledge as one’s own. A studious person loves an opinion because it is true, not because it is her own. The studious are willing to share the truth that they have discovered for the good of others, ultimately because they recognize that all truth participates in God and all wisdom exists in the Christ who is public and belongs to all.

In his Exposition on Psalm 2, an insight about studiousness can be deduced from Augustine’s discussion of Moses’ motivation for wanting to know God’s name. Augustine states that Moses’ “initial desire was good and was not ignored. He asked God’s name not out of impertinent curiosity but because he needed to know it for his ministry.” By itself, the appetite for knowledge is not bad. The appetite

---

57 This claim certainly involves epistemological questions which are beyond the scope of this paper. I think Robert Barron’s recent proposal for the epistemic primacy of Christ is congruent with Augustine’s conviction here. For Barron, the “deepest truth of things must become fully intelligible only through Christ.” See Robert Barron, The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism (Grand Rapids: Brazo Press, 2007), p. 19.

58 Augustine, Confessions, 12.25

59 Ibid.

60 Augustine, Exposition on the Psalms, 101.2
becomes disordered when one wants knowledge for knowledge’s sake. The studious person does not view knowledge as an end unto itself. Rather, the desire to know is rooted in the desire to love God and minister to others. The studious person uses knowledge to enjoy God and love neighbor.

I will conclude this section with a discussion of Book X of On the Trinity, a text which contains Augustine’s constructive proposal that studiousness involves a deep love of knowledge. For Augustine, one cannot love a thing which is not known. The question in this book, then, is what kind of love exists in the studious, who are described as “those who do not already know, but are still desiring to know any branch of learning.” Augustine sets forth an example of someone who hears an unknown sign or word. The person who hears the word desires to know what it signifies. Yet in order to have this desire the person must already know that the word is a sign. Therefore, the thing is partly known, yet it is not fully known, and thus the one “inflamed with studious zeal” desires to know what remains to be known.

Surely, Augustine contends, no one would say that the person with “studious zeal” who seeks to know the word is without love. Yet what does he love? If something cannot be loved unless it is known, and if there still remains something that is unknown in the word, then how can the studious person be said to love? Augustine concludes: “What then does he love, except that he knows and perceives in the reason of things what excellence there is in learning.” What the studious mind knows is the goodness of learning, in this case the learning of languages. His explication of the studious mind’s love deserves extensive quotation:

The beauty, then, of this knowledge is already discerned by thought, and the thing being known is loved; and that thing is so regarded, and so stimulates the studious zeal of learners, that they are moved with respect to it, and desire it eagerly in all the labor which they spend upon the attainment of such a capacity, in order that they may also embrace in practice that which they know beforehand by reason. On the Trinity, 10.1.2

---

61 Augustine, On the Trinity, 10.1.1

62 Ibid., 10.1.2

63 Ibid. Emphasis added.
There is a beauty to knowledge; in this case there is a beauty to the knowledge of words. The beauty of this knowledge is related to the recognition that understanding and speaking different languages is a good employment of knowledge. The studious mind knows the beauty of this learning, and this beauty is what it loves when it earnestly seeks to know what is unknown. By this example, Augustine makes a crucial point about the sort of love the studious have. The studious love to know. Augustine’s positive view of the acquisition of knowledge is striking. It is entirely appropriate to love knowing. Augustine says that the inquisitive person who is carried away by the love of knowing things unknown is positively distinguished from the ordinary student. The studious mind discerns the beauty and goodness of knowledge, and thus it diligently—indeed passionately—seeks knowledge.

Yet despite its zeal for learning, the studious mind does not seize knowledge and make it its own possession. Perverse desire for knowledge consists in the mind seeing some things as excellent and then grasping those things for itself. When this happens, the mind becomes anxious and fearful that the knowledge it has acquired will be lost. For Augustine, when the mind wishes to

…appropriate those things to itself, and not to be like to Him by His gift, but to be what He is by its own, it begins to move and slip gradually into less and less, which it thinks to be more and more; for it is neither sufficient for itself, nor is anything at all sufficient for it, if it withdraws from Him who alone is sufficient. *On the Trinity*, 10.5.7

The consequence of the mind clutching knowledge for itself is that the mind becomes infinitely unsatisfied with anything that it acquires. This is so because the mind “withdraws from Him who alone is sufficient” and as a result the mind becomes “less and less.” ⁶⁴ When the mind selfishly extracts knowledge for itself, when it fails to see knowledge as a gift of God to be used to enjoy God, it descends into infinite restlessness.

Two concluding statements about studiousness are in order. Firstly, studiousness involves loving to know. In my assessment, Augustine quite clearly insists on the goodness and beauty of knowledge and

---

⁶⁴ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 10.5.7
learning, as well as the appropriateness of diligence, intensity, and zeal in pursuing that which is unknown. Secondly, studiousness is rooted in a deep conviction that God alone is sufficient. Only the eternal and unchangeable Trinity grants true enjoyment. Love of knowledge becomes disordered when the mind attempts to enjoy knowledge in and of itself, that is, with no reference to God. Since no thing is capable of sustaining true enjoyment, the mind has to move on to something else. The mind is left with an insatiable desire to acquire other things for itself. Aquinas’s description of curiosity as the “the roaming unrest of the spirit” is quite fitting on this point.65 The curious mind is restless, unable to sustain extensive inquiry. The studious mind, however, is diligent in its pursuit of knowledge, because the pursuit is rooted in the belief that God alone is sufficient and God alone can grant rest. In his summary of On the Trinity, Robert Crouse states that Augustine’s only aim was to know God and his own soul: “the whole of knowledge belongs to that aspiration, because all our knowings and all our lovings, from the lowest to the highest, are aspects of the one striving of the restless heart, which can rest only in the loving knowledge of God.”66

In sum, curiosity reflects the disorderliness of love. Studiousness orders the perverse love of knowledge by rooting the desire for knowledge in nothing other than love of God and neighbor. Studiousness begins with the recognition that in the humble and incarnate Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. The studious person does not seek to be novel, but rather diligently seeks to penetrate these treasures by submitting to the teachings of Christ. To be studious is to heed Paul’s warning that “Knowledge puffs up.”67 Studiousness resists the prideful temptation to make knowledge private and realizes that any truth that is known is common to all. The curious want to know something simply for the sensations involved in knowing. The studious, however, want to know something because of their love for learning and knowledge, and the knowledge they acquire is used for love of God and neighbor.

67 1 Cor. 8:1
neighbor. The virtue of studiousness disciplines the eyes. Recall that one of Augustine’s definitions of virtue is “perfect looking.”

The gaze of the studious mind is not bound to temporal things, but is rather turned attentively to God, and thus it finds enjoyment in the contemplation of God alone. The eyes of the curious mind are distracted and restless, whereas the eyes of the studious mind are focused and capable of sustained inquiry.

IV. The Virtue of Studiousness and Intellectual Habits

We do not share Augustine’s polemical milieu. His explication of curiosity was to a great degree driven by his anti-Manichaean concerns. Nevertheless, I think Augustine’s distinction between curiosity and studiousness possesses insights which transcend the particularities of his time and place. In point of fact, Augustinian studiousness has much to contribute to the formation of good intellectual habits. One of the disturbing characteristics of the vice of curiosity is that it is “cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning.” Could it be that some of our intellectual habits, hidden under the name of sound learning, resemble the vice of curiosity more than the virtue of studiousness? Is our learning and study connected to the ultimate aim of life? Is our desire for knowledge marked more by ambitions of earning grades, attaining degrees, generating sermons, acquiring tenure, or publishing works than by a deep love of truth and a desire to contemplate the deep things of God? Does the allurement of novelty cause us to be negligent of the truths of old? Do we seek knowledge in order to captivate the attention of others, to be viewed by others as someone who knows, or do we seek knowledge so that we can love God and neighbor well? Are the eyes of our minds characterized by constant, unsatisfactory movement from object to object, or are they attentive and patient with the object of study? Any student, scholar, pastor, or lay person who

68 Augustine, *Soliloquies*, 1.13

69 I think the spirit of Augustinian studiousness is apparent in the practices of the Oxford Methodists. Interestingly, in John Wesley’s “General Rules for Employing Time,” rule six calls for an avoidance of “curiosity and all useless employments and knowledge.” This avoidance of “curiosity” is on display in the organized piety of the Oxford Methodists, a piety which included a disciplined program of study. See Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 82-85.

70 Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.54
reflects seriously upon these questions most likely will confess that the vice of curiosity is alive and well in our intellectual habits.

Some might say that Augustine’s understanding of studiousness is overly pious, too ascetic, and far-removed from the realities of modern intellectual life. I maintain, however, that the virtue of studiousness can inform modern intellectual life in significant ways. Firstly, Augustinian studiousness reminds us that our learning and study must be connected to the ultimate aim of life—happiness in God. In study, the eyes of our minds must ultimately be turned toward the contemplation of God. Everything that is studied must be referred to God. This in no way means that the only virtuous discipline is theology. All disciplines which seek truth are capable of contemplating God, for God is the source of all truth and all truth participates in God. The details of the intellectual work of the scientist, musician, or historian must be related to the Creator of all things. In his book *The Intellectual Life*, A.D. Sertillanges encourages the scholar to relate the particulars of her work to the supreme Truth:

Do not therefore, when you work, take too low a point of view. Think high. Keep the soul of a seer while plucking the little twigs of truth, and, what is still more obviously necessary, do not reduce sublime questions to petty proportions. Be conscious that you are touching on great secrets, sharing the inspiration of great souls; perceive the light that trickles in here or there, while farther off, in continuity with this slender gleam, it floods worlds as it flows unbrokenly from the pure Source of all things.\(^1\)

When the eyes are directed to God, the truth perceived in any branch of learning is accepted as a gift of the Creator. Further, when a learner keeps the supreme good in view in all her studies, there is less of a chance that studies will become dominated by near-sighted and self-centered goals and more of a chance that studies will cultivate a deeper love of God and neighbor.

Secondly, Augustinian studiousness reminds us that learning requires sustained attention. The curious person moves to-and-fro, hankering after various objects, never dwelling too long on the study of one thing, and never capable of prolonged contemplation of a discovered truth. Yves Simon ruminates on

how the philosopher spends years searching for a solution to a particular problem. Unfortunately, once the philosopher obtains the results of research, they are quickly forgotten because a new problem demands attention. Simon says that “we seek truth for years, and when we have arrived at it, instead of resting in it, we begin to seek some other truth.” For Simon, this is a disorder because it does not lead to “the terminal activity of contemplation.” Studiousness is the discipline which allows the mind to patiently rest in the discovery of truth, and by this rest the mind comes to a greater contemplation of God. At times, the incessant demand for results in intellectual life—the “publish or perish” mentality—is not conducive to such restful contemplation.

For Augustine, curious habits are manifested in glances at mangled corpses or experiments with magical arts. For us, curious habits are manifested in skimming various items of information via iPhones, Wikipedia, and search engines. Constant access to information through technological mediums, despite its merits, has in many ways reduced our capacity to diligently contemplate truth and thoroughly acquire knowledge. As Sven Birkerts rightly observes, one of the losses of “electronic postmodernity” is a “reduced attention span and a general impatience with sustained enquiry.” The discipline of studiousness restrains our disordered, consumer appetite for knowledge so that patient, worthwhile pursuits of knowledge can be undertaken.

Finally, Augustinian studiousness reminds us that learning ought be characterized by love. Recall that in On the Trinity the studious person loves to know what is unknown. To be studious is to love

---


73 Ibid.

74 See Sally Thomas, “iPhones have Consequences,” First Things: A Survey of Religion, Culture, and Public Life 128 (November 2008), pp. 11-13. Thomas, relying on Mark Bauerlein, argues that a person’s internet “screen reading, surfing, and searching habits…mark an obdurate resistance to certain lower-order and higher-ordered thinking skills [including] the capacity to read carefully and to cogitate analytically.” See p. 12.

75 Sven Birkerts, The Guttenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 27.
learning. Studiousness allows us to find joy and pleasure in learning. Simone Weil provides an apt description of joy in studiousness: “the joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will not even have a trade.”76 Whereas sustained attention is often associated with willpower, Weil argues that it ought to be associated with pleasure and joy. The pursuit of knowledge is not a matter of sheer determination—it is a matter of loving to know. This is quite different than the curious person who revels in the sheer sensation of knowing. The studious person finds joy in learning ultimately because she realizes that the knowledge she is attaining is leading her to a deeper participation in Christ—the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.