

Curiosity and Smartphones

BY DOUGLAS V. HENRY

Why is mobile connectivity both so compelling and unsettling? Whether or not our time in virtual reality runs contrary to the soul's deep need for the love of God and others depends on why we pursue virtual lives, what they teach us to desire, and how we cherish the things they provide.

For all the frenetic change heralded by new technology, the human heart – with its longings and loves, heartaches and heartbreaks – remains essentially unchanged. We may delight in carrying new gadgets and developing virtual networks alongside our trusty old tools and time-tested friendships. We may even give pride of place to the new over the old. Yet whatever technology's wizardry does for us, it cannot fundamentally alter our heart's desire to love God and to love others in God.

That is not to say that life in the virtual world is without risks. The powerful mobile technologies betokened by Androids, Blackberries, and iPhones present challenges to Christians who are called to love God and others. What such potent tools make possible is astounding. They offer immediate access to important and trivial information alike; personally customizable news from around the world; books, furniture, clothing, collectibles, and anything else on amazon.com or eBay; and easy location of restaurants, replete with gourmet reviews and driving directions. Having immediate access to these things is not itself bad. However, living in a world of perpetual mobile connectivity can be spiritually distracting, and even deforming, for those who succumb to its inducements.

I am persuaded that we can live virtuously in the virtual world – maybe. Whether or not our time in virtual reality runs contrary to the soul's deep need for the love of God and others depends on *why* we pursue virtual lives,

what virtual lives teach us to desire, and *how* we cherish the things virtual lives provide. And while other aspects of our virtual lives deserve consideration as well, I am going to attend here to the kinds of *intellectual appetites* that we experience, nurture, and indulge through the medium of interactive devices such as smartphones.

Two principal forms of intellectual appetite are at stake: *curiositas* and *studiositas*. Because competing intellectual appetites motivate our fascination with virtual life, knowing the different ways that we can desire knowledge sheds light on why mobile connectivity is both compelling and unsettling. In short, by clarifying the “why,” “what,” and “how” which are at stake when we display *curiositas* and when we exemplify *studiositas*, we will be in a better position to see what Christians through the ages have seen: satisfying the desire for knowledge is an opportunity for sin and for grace.

AN APPETITE FOR KNOWLEDGE

Does it make sense to speak of an *appetite* for knowledge? We certainly desire knowledge. Indeed, so pervasive is the human desire for knowledge that Aristotle begins one of his important works by writing, “All men by nature desire to know.”¹ One does not have to be brainy or educated for Aristotle’s dictum to hold – merely being human suffices. *Everyone* longs to know about something. We wonder about all kinds of things: grand and small, personal and practical, natural and philosophical. Who was that? How does it work? Why does it happen? Where are we going? What shall we do? When we figure out answers to a given desire to know something, we are more or less satisfied, indeed sated, depending on how acute our desire for that knowledge happens to be.

But more than that, *appetite* is an especially fitting way of thinking about our desire to know. For one thing, speaking of intellectual appetites and cravings reminds us that our minds, no less than our bellies, can be spoken of in terms of wants, wishes, longings, and yearnings. When we want to know an unknown, our minds experience a nagging emptiness analogous to an empty stomach’s grumbling for food. This is because, as Paul Griffiths explains, appetite at a basic level involves the desire to make present something that is absent.² Griffiths makes clear that we may have appetites for things both material (food, drink, clothing, the body of one’s beloved, a place of sun-lit beauty) and immaterial (truth, love, goodness, knowledge). To be sure, we must exercise care in distinguishing material and immaterial things; in human experience we ordinarily find them bound together in complex ways. But that is all the more reason why we can naturally extend the language of appetite to cover desires for more than merely food and drink.

Consider the way we experience and satisfy physical appetites. When we make food present to a ravenous belly, our emptiness is filled and a craving is satiated. Our satisfaction on being fulfilled is not only physical; it is emotional, psychological, and even spiritual. In fact, a little reflection

makes obvious the reasons why significant religious rituals accompany seasons of planting and harvesting. With the exception of prosperous twenty-first-century Westerners, most human beings have anxiously anticipated physical hunger and thirst, vigilantly cultivated grains, fruits, flocks, and herds against future need, and celebrated, in lavish religious feasts of thanksgiving, the abundance that keeps hunger and thirst at bay for another season. The stronger our appetite, the more powerfully we celebrate our wellbeing in filling the emptiness.

In many respects our intellectual appetites are like our physical appetites. In the satisfaction of our intellectual appetites, we do not merely find ourselves in ho-hum possession of knowledge. When we grasp newfound understanding that once was absent, yet intently desired, we have gladness in our fulfillment. A craving appetite for knowledge can preoccupy us, prolonged difficulty in securing a desired intellectual good can pain us, and the presence of knowledge for which we longed can bring us joyful satisfaction.

There is a further reason why we should think about our desire to know as an appetite. Locating the desire for knowledge among our appetites helps us see that the desire for knowledge can be judged as better or worse. Appetites, after all, are not indiscriminately good. Some of them are good, of course. When our appetites are well motivated, seek fulfillment in appropriate objects, and pursue satisfaction in the right ways, then they are good. But when the “why,” “what,” and “how” of our desires go awry, our appetites become bad. We know this intuitively, for we make routine judgments about which of our appetites

deserve approbation and which deserve censure. As I enter mid-life with its slackening metabolism, for instance, I may not *do* the right thing vis-à-vis my late-night appetite for tortilla chips and salsa, but I almost always *think* of it as a craving best denied.

Intellectual appetites, too, are not indiscriminately good. Christians worthily accede to some kinds of

intellectual appetite. However, some forms and objects of knowledge, pursued in the grip of particular kinds of intellectual appetite, are simply sinful. St. Augustine tells the story of his dear friend Alypius who, despite himself, was captivated by the sounds of violent gladiatorial combat in the Roman Coliseum, opened his eyes, and greedily feasted them on the cruelty unfolding before him. To his shame, Alypius succumbed to a powerful impetus to know

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what was transpiring on the great field below. His longing was fulfilled, yet he left the Coliseum having given way to an unworthy intellectual appetite.³ We find the paradigmatic instance of intellectual appetite gone awry in the Garden of Eden. Beholding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and under the insidious influence of the serpent, “the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, [and] she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6, ESV).⁴ The desire to know is not good without qualification, and thinking of intellectual desire as an appetite can help us remember that we must exercise discernment in fulfilling it.

The language of *appetite* helps us attend to another helpful set of truths. Wayward appetites may be flatly refused. Indeed, among less-than-fully-virtuous folks (in whose company I stand), they often must be agonizingly resisted. Of course, we also can unthinkingly and automatically satisfy our appetites, both the necessary and good ones as well as the trivial and wicked ones. We can even take measures to cherish and coddle our appetites. Not only can we desire something, we can desire a deepening of our desire. Appetites can be nurtured and increased, so that they loom larger and stamp their imprint all the more deeply on our lives.

Put another way, appetites stand within a larger pattern of judgments and habits that give them more or less purchase upon our lives. When we unrelentingly crave something, it is almost always a desire to which we have made ourselves available in the past. Through habitual openness to an appetite, and certainly by routinely satisfying an appetite, we increase its hold on us, giving it near complete mastery over us in extreme cases. Although we may typically think of *physical* appetites as powerful influences in our lives, the fact is that *intellectual* appetites operate similarly. We can decrease or increase the intensity of our appetite to know something by habitually denying or satisfying it.

TWO KINDS OF INTELLECTUAL APPETITE

Curiositas and *studiositas* name two strikingly different kinds of intellectual appetite. In Christian moral theology, *curiositas* is the name given to a sinful form of intellectual appetite; *studiositas* identifies a praiseworthy form of appetite for knowledge. The two appetites are different in why they desire knowledge, what they desire in seeking knowledge, and how they dispose us toward knowledge. That is, *curiositas* and *studiositas* have different purposes, seek different things, and occupy different worlds.

Let me take the “why,” “what,” and “how” of the two kinds of intellectual appetite in turn, following Paul Griffiths’ excellent analysis of curiosity and studiosity. With the virtual world of smartphones in view, we can then explore some questions about how participation in a life of technologically enabled mobile connectivity might dispose us more or less toward curiosity and studiosity.

First, the motivations and purposes—the *why*—underlying the two kinds of intellectual appetite differ. As Griffiths writes, “Both intellectual appetites seek knowledge: that is what makes them forms of intellectual appetite. But they do so with different purposes: where curiosity wants possession, studiousness seeks participation.”⁵ In the clearest instances of curiosity, the control of knowledge for one’s own purposes looms large. The curious are motivated by the desire to possess, conquer, own, and sequester for private purposes an intellectual good that could benefit others, but which the curious claim instead for themselves. By contrast, the studious desire “participatory intimacy” with knowledge. They delight in the joy of creaturely proximity to truth, regarding it as an inexhaustible good not diminished in the least when others share in it. In fact, studious persons know that sharing together in a common apprehension of the truth enriches everyone’s delight in knowing.

Second, *what* the curious seek is profoundly different from what the studious seek. Griffiths helpfully limns what he calls “the deepest contrast between curiosity and studiousness,” the kind of world that each inhabits. “The curious inhabit a world of objects, which can be sequestered and possessed; the studious inhabit a world of gifts...” (p. 22). Those in the grip of *curiositas* see and know things in the world as mere things, as objects out there to be taken as one’s own. Bending in a different direction, those formed by *studiositas* see and know the world around them as constituted not by things, but by gifts.

Understanding the different worlds inhabited by the curious and the studious is crucially important. As Iris Murdoch writes, “*How we see our situation is itself, already, a moral activity,*”⁶ and “I can only choose within the world that I can see.”⁷

Because the curious see only *objects* in the world, their purposes and choices range toward conquest, possession, and ownership. How jarringly out of tune such purposes are in a world that is understood as grace-filled, as full of God’s good *gifts*! Conquerors do not receive or celebrate gifts, and neither do the merely curious. They can feel important in owning or in knowing something that nobody else possesses. For them, though, delighting in something that is graciously shared comes, if at all, with difficulty. But in a way of being that is a world apart from the curious, the studious can and do delight in a

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created order that, as they see it, is a plenitude of gifts to discern, cherish, and know intently. As Griffiths writes, “the cosmos and its constituents are without remainder divine gift...and [they are], from beginning to end, saturated with God’s glory, radiant with God’s light, made beautiful by God’s caress, given to its givees with entreaty to see it and to rejoice in it for what it is” (p. 73). The studious see that world of gifts, and they long to understand those gifts borne of God’s goodness.

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Third, how the two appetites orient us toward knowledge differs. “Curiosity,” Griffiths tells us, “is concerned with novelty: curious people want to know what they do not yet know, ideally what no one yet knows” (p. 22). *Curiositas* causes us to chase after whatever “news” no one else yet possesses. By laying unique claim to

knowledge of the latest developments, the curious seek to prove, both to themselves and others, their superiority. *Curiositas* also underwrites a tendency toward loquacity, Griffiths maintains. The “curious need not only to know, but to be known as knowers” (p. 218); unsurprisingly, then, the curious enjoy speaking about what they know that no one else knows, marking them out as *au courant* and publicly registering their possession of information, news, or gossip that no one else yet knows. Not only do the curious long for novelty and tend toward loquacity, but most of all their intellectual appetite savors a spectacle. Although I cannot adequately address the nature of the spectacular here, I can gesture toward its problems by once more letting Griffiths speak: “The spectacle is the icon’s reversed image. It is a sensible array characterized principally by damage: damage in what it depicts, and damage, too, in the way it is received and understood and used” (p. 199). When we behold a spectacle, we encounter something that God does not intend, we typically see less than what is truly there, and we all too quickly exhaust our interest in it. Alypius’ appetite for the violent sights of the Coliseum provides an apt example, though we regrettably do not have to look far for other examples. Sights of the sin-wracked damage of God’s good gifts, along with our diminishment in seeking knowledge of them, characterize curiosity’s appetite for spectacles.

Studiositas differs in every relevant way in how it orients us toward knowledge. “Studios people seek knowledge with the awareness that novelty is not what counts,” not least of all because God already knows everything that we could know, and what we happen to learn we appre-

hend as a matter of God's good gifts (p. 22). More than that, the studious prefer repeated, deepening encounters with what they can always know only partially. They strive for an intimacy of understanding that is borne of oft-repeated experience with the same thing. In addition, because the studious have little concern to be known as knowers, they have no cause to broadcast their grip on the truth, preferring instead either silence or else the "studious stammer," which Griffiths calls a "figure for speech whose acknowledgement of its insufficiency to the topic is evident on its surface" (p. 218). Finally, the studious look not for spectacles, but instead for the true icon, a beautiful array that "beckons the gaze into something deeper than itself by opening its surface beauties...into something much more beautiful than itself, which is to say into the inner-trinitarian economy in which it participates as icon" (p. 192).

Our awareness of how *curiositas* and *studiositas* embrace different purposes, worlds, and practices can help us exercise self-critical judgment over our intellectual appetites. Given that not all appetites are good, we need to know which intellectual appetites to encourage and fulfill, as well as which ones to curb. In particular, we have good reasons to regard *curiositas* as a primary form of errant intellectual appetite. In the curious person's desire to possess endlessly new knowledge and exhibit it proudly, and even more in the appetite for the bizarre spectacle, he or she falls short of intellectual appetite ordered to the love of God. Thus aware of the lure of curiosity, we must make prudent decisions about how to nurture an appetite for the right sort of knowledge. We might even wonder if prudence calls us to resist the virtual lives made possible by smartphones.

CURIOSITAS, STUDIOSITAS, AND SMARTPHONES

A smartphone connected to the Internet is the ideal technology for cultivating and satisfying *curiositas*. These pocket-sized gadgets provide easy access to new knowledge on demand, so that a hunger for novelty finds endless fodder, inadequate though it is for real intellectual sustenance. Androids, Blackberries, and iPhones also present ample opportunity to be known as in the loop, so much so that simply sporting one implies the possession of knowledge. Someone carrying the latest smartphone model, after all, must be smart—right? Around my workplace, dueling iPhone users are ubiquitous, each one reporting to the other the *even more recently posted* Facebook entry, blog comment, or random news item. Smartphone savants, by and large, cannot keep silent about what they know. And if those pernicious habits were not enough to make us wary about virtual lives, the heartbreaking images of desecration and desolation all too readily conjured up by smartphones should do so. That they give us spectacles far more readily than icons is worrisome.

Smartphones often underwrite a way of being in the world that is more concerned with objects than gifts. Too often they are themselves objects to

which their owners bear a possessive relationship, and they stand in the way of their owners' enjoyment of the divinely superintended beneficence that characterizes our gift-laden existence. Sun-lit skies, songbirds' melodious celebrations, and friendly sidewalk greetings receive little notice by those in thrall to their smartphones. The curious, with their deformed intellectual appetites, want to know what *they* want to know; openness to the wisdom one acquires in graciously welcoming a self-transcendent gift is beyond them.

An intellectual appetite for endlessly new knowledge, possessed for one's private gain and proudly displayed to oneself and others, certainly seems the kind of thing that a smartphone renders likely, if not inevitable. Yet I ultimately do not want to say that perpetual mobile connectivity must be spiritually distracting or deforming. *Curiositas*, with its powerful, disordered love for knowledge, tempted God's faithful long before Steve Jobs presented the world with its first iPhones. While smartphones may increase the number of occasions for *curiositas* and uniquely intensify one's appetite for vain knowledge, getting rid of them will not eliminate *curiositas*.

In fact, the ubiquitous temptation to *curiositas* that our new technology presents can, paradoxically, help us. Because smartphones are such obvious instruments for sating curiosity about anything and everything, they can make us more aware of the need for discernment about our intellectual appetites. Apparent risks prompt us to cautiousness where hidden hazards naturally do not. Thus, because we know that mounting the high steps of a ladder is inherently risky, we ensure the ladder legs are well supported and we take deliberate steps. When we are healthy and fit, by contrast, we seldom think twice about rushing up or down a stairway. Entering the virtual world should be for us more like cautiously using a ladder rather than fearlessly dashing down the stairs. As long as we see how high the stakes are, and provided we appreciate how perilous virtual life can be, an Android or a Blackberry can be a useful tool.

We ought also to remember that iPads, netbooks, and smartphones are tools that can be put to good use. Especially when traveling, I use my iPad to search, read, and study Scripture. It can access virtually anything on the Internet, including the issue of *Christian Reflection* containing these very words. It gives me pictures of nature and works of art that, under the aegis of *studiositas*, inspire my contemplative gratitude to God. In tandem with a Dropbox account, my iPad allows me to review my lecture notes, read my colleagues' work, and make progress on my latest scholarly article. All of these activities, hopefully oriented toward *studiositas*, may be undertaken readily and well through the technology we now have.

Well-formed Christian disciples bear the marks of longing for redemption through Jesus and the peace of God's kingdom. Along with everything else it encompasses, that hope-filled yearning should be reflected in well-ordered intellectual appetites. Because we long for the right ordering of all our loves, we must pay attention to our intellectual appetites. We should

desire to know certain things but not others. We should cherish knowledge for particular reasons but not others. We should take satisfaction in fulfilling some intellectual appetites but not others. Whether virtual life helps or hinders Christian formation depends on why we pursue it, the kinds of things we seek in it, and the ways we inhabit it.

We do well to remember that all vices take something that is potentially good and ruin it by loving it inordinately. *Curiositas* takes our natural appetite for knowledge and distorts its motivations, objects, and modes. In doing so, *curiositas* recapitulates a theme that runs through every form of errant desire. All of the vices share “the same familiar prideful pattern: a quest to provide happiness for ourselves through whatever god-substitute we choose—pleasure, approval, wealth, power, status,” Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung reminds us. “We are not willing to let God be in control, so we refuse to keep these goods in their place and accept them as gifts from his hand.”⁸ By developing habits of *studiositas* rather than *curiositas*—especially when wielding potent tools such as smartphones—we can see God’s love more clearly in the graciously given gifts that we receive, seek to understand, and embrace as goods that direct us back to delight in God alone.

NOTES

1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 980a20.

2 Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 94. In this section I follow Griffiths’ discussion in chapter 7, “Appetite.”

3 Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.8, translated by F. J. Sheed and edited by Michael P. Foley, second edition (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006).

4 Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®)*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

5 Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite*, 21-22. Further page citations will be in the text.

6 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 315.

7 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971; reprinted New York: Routledge, 2001), 35-36.

8 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 183.



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