

Curiosity

The Mental Hunger of Humans

Dr Bernhard Kutzler

Curiosity: The Mental Hunger of Humans

Bernhard Kutzler

Cover design © Hannes Kutzler, www.HannesKutzler.at

(photo on cover by MJGraphics licensed from shutterstock.com)

Author photo by Hannes Kutzler

Copy edited by Philip Yorke

Published by Bernhard Kutzler, Scharnstein, Austria

Original edition: *“Neugier: Der geistige Hunger des Menschen“*

ISBN paperback: 978-3-9504875-4-1

ISBN hardcover: 978-3-9504875-5-8

ISBN ebook: 978-3-9504875-6-5

Copyright © 2020 Bernhard Kutzler, www.BernhardKutzler.com

All rights reserved.

No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. Under no circumstances may any part of this book be photocopied for resale.

Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws.

Contents

1	1
2	3
3	22
4	31
5	42
6	53
7	67
8	96
9	106
10	118
11	133
Glossary	134
Acknowledgement	136

1

This is the story of my exploration into curiosity. What made me explore curiosity? My curiosity, of course! I've always been very curious. This is why I became a scientist and worked over twenty years as a mathematician. But the world has so much to offer – I was way too curious to deal with mathematics for the rest of my life. I often explored other topics and, ultimately, I ended my career in 2009 and began to explore humans, human behavior, and consciousness.

I wanted to know that which makes me ask, explore, and find. I wanted to find out about my curiosity. I wanted to explore why I enjoy exploring.

*Others have seen what is and asked: Why?
I have seen what could be and asked: Why not?
(Pablo Picasso)*

Pablo Picasso was one of the most curious people of the twentieth century.

*I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.
(Albert Einstein)*

Albert Einstein too was one of the most curious people of the twentieth century. He has been my greatest inspiration since I was a teenager. I had my brother paint a portrait of Einstein onto the hood of my first car.

Einstein is considered one of the greatest science geniuses in recorded history. Picasso is considered one of the greatest art geniuses in recorded history. The power that drove both and created their unbelievable careers came from their ravenous curiosity. I wanted to find out about this power. How does it emerge? What role does it play in life? Why do some people seem more curious than others? Why does curiosity appear in so many different forms? And so on.

*Every child is an artist.
The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.
(Pablo Picasso)*

*Play is the highest form of research.
(Albert Einstein)*

As children we are limitlessly curious and permanently explore the world by asking the questions 'Why?' and 'Why not?' in countless ways. This stops when we grow up. Why?

A child's ravenous curiosity leads to its joy of and contentment with life. But it is also the key for joy and contentment at any age. Can anyone become truly curious again?

Read on to learn what I found out.

I will tell the story of my exploration into curiosity in the form of a soliloquy because research is exactly that. I ask myself questions. I find answers. I question my answers. I find better arguments – or better answers. By telling the story of my exploration as a documentation of my chains of thought and reasoning, the results become comprehensible. Moreover: Why not write a non-fiction book in this format?

2

What is curiosity?

We¹ could look it up in a psychology book.

There we won't find what curiosity *is*. We would only find a description of the author's perspective on curiosity. Curiosity is so much more than can be expressed by words. In fact, this is true for everything. The best description of a red wine cannot replace sampling it. The best travel report about Hawaii cannot replace going there. Therefore, we will explore curiosity ourselves.

How do we start?

Let's start by exploring the word *curiosity*. What does it mean?

According to the online Cambridge Dictionary, it is "*an eager wish to know or learn about something.*"

This definition is superficial and thus useless. What does it mean to "know"? What is "something"? What is "eager"? Language is the most important tool for our exploration, therefore we need to be as precise as possible with the words that we use. We can't

¹ I often talk with and about me in the plural ... after all, I am born under the sign of Gemini, which means that, ultimately, I am two. And even Goethe wrote: "*Two souls alas! are dwelling in my breast.*" Besides, using "we" appears particularly appropriate for a soliloquy.

base our exploration on approximate meanings.
What is the original meaning of the word *curiosity*?

What do we mean by the *original* meaning of a word?

Language is alive and therefore the meanings of words change permanently. This makes every communication challenging. It is hard to know what message somebody wants to convey based on what they say or write.

Let's take the word 'monk' as an example. Usually it denotes a man living in a monastery.

The online Cambridge Dictionary gives the following definition: "*a member of a group of religious men who do not marry and usually live together in a monastery.*"

This definition is unsatisfactory,. For example, it does not explain the term "religious." And: what is "usually?"

In an oral conversation one can ask. But with written text one almost always has to guess.

The original meaning of a word is defined by its roots. Typically, the roots of a word are from an old language such as Latin or Ancient Greek. Since these languages are not spoken any more, the meanings of their words don't change. This makes the roots useful. Moreover, the roots often give deep insights into the essence of that which they denote.

The word *monk* originates from the Ancient Greek word *monakhos* that means “solitary.” Its root is the Ancient Greek word *monos* (= *alone*).

Therefore, the original meaning of the word ‘monk’ is a person living alone, ie a hermit – independent of gender or whether they are religious.

We can find the origins of words in etymological dictionaries.²

The word *curiosity* originates from the Latin word *cure* that means “care.”

To care for something means to focus on it and to do something for it – such as when a mother cares for her child. However, there is more to curiosity than caring. Albert Einstein certainly cared for what he did, but the essence of his “*passionate curiosity*,” as he phrased it, was more than caring.

We could research the word in other languages.

Let’s look at some. French: *curiosité*; Italian: *curiosità*; Spanish: *curiosidad*; German: *Neugier*; Dutch: *nieuwsgierigheid*; Swedish: *nyfikenhet*.

The words in French, Italian, and Spanish are similar to the English word and thus have the same Latin root *cure*. The words in German, Dutch, and Swedish

² Our primary source for the roots of words is Douglas Harper’s *Online Etymology Dictionary* (www.etymonline.com). At the end of this book is a Glossary with all word origins that we researched throughout this exploration.

also seem to share the same root or roots, therefore it should suffice to look at one of them.

The German word *Neugier* is comprised of two parts: *neu* (= *new*) and *Gier* (= *craving, greed*). It expresses the “*craving for something new.*”

The German word *Gier* has the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root **gher-* (= *to desire, like*). Therefore, this word originally means a less intensive form of longing than is expressed by ‘craving’ or ‘greed.’

Both the German word *neu* and the English word *new* have the PIE root **newo-* (= *new*). But this definition is circular and thus useless.

We will try a different route. New is an adjective. What is the prerequisite for something to be considered new?

A new car is a car that comes fresh from a car dealer.

How long is a new car new?

If we buy a new car, it is still new to us after, say, a month. But for the car dealer it is not new anymore immediately after we sign the sale contract or register the car.

How about the attribute ‘new’ in the case of buying a used car?

Good question ... for us it is nevertheless a new car.

Therefore, new can have two meanings:

(1) comes fresh from production or was not used yet,

(2) comes fresh into our life.

What is the difference between these two meanings?

The first is from the perspective of the object, the second is from our perspective.

In other words, new as an *objective* property and new as a *subjective* property.

How long is a new car new to us?

As long as it smells new.

When is the new smell not experienced as new anymore?

Once we don't experience it as a new smell upon entering the car.

In other words?

Once we got used to it.

Once we got used to our new car, we don't consider it new anymore. In other words, *familiarization* kills newness. What kind of newness is meant with the word Neugier/curiosity?

A curious person desires something that is new to them. Hence, curiosity is about the subjective new.

Since the subjective new is the unfamiliar and unknown, the word Neugier/curiosity denotes the “*desire for something one does not know or is not familiar with.*”

Usually this includes to leave the known and familiar.

We also need to keep in mind the aspect of caring as expressed by the English word curiosity. Einstein not only had the *desire* to find new insights about the universe, he *cared* to find them.

To care for something means to devote one’s attention to it and do something for or with it. Care goes further than desire.

Desire is passive. We could sit motionless in a chair for an hour and desire something. Care is active. Care acts to obtain what desire seeks. This makes care the actual source of the power of curiosity.

**

Are people curious in that sense? Are they active in order to obtain something new?

Hardly anybody is curious in that sense. People are *creatures of habit*.

But they desire new dresses, new cars, new phones, new vacation destinations, etc.

But it must not be “*too much*” new. The new dress should be new but in the familiar style. The new car should be new but of the familiar brand. The new cell

phone should be new, but everything from the old phone should be transferable so that one can continue using it. And even if somebody buys his or her first car, computer, or cell phone, the motive usually is not true curiosity.

Many people buy a product because it is fashionable.

Regarding the central issues of their lives, people want to keep what they have. People want to keep their “familiar lives.”

What are the central issues of life?

One is *partnership*. Many people remain in a partnership even if it is fraught with arguments or indifference. They remain in a partnership because they are afraid of the inevitable changes that a separation would bring.

We know that from experience.

Another central issue of life is *work*. Most people have a career that does not suit them. Either they work on something that does not fulfill them or they experience negativity with aspects of their work, such as with their coworkers. This makes their job a burden and they long for the end of a working day even before it starts.

What is behind the fear of change? Why does someone remain in a career even if it is not the right choice for them?

The job brings money, and money is needed to live. Besides, what would partners/parents/friends/neighbors say if one would quit one's job? Everybody knows that finding a new job isn't always easy.

So it's about money and other people. What are these two reasons really about?

Security and social acceptance.

Why do people remain in inappropriate partnerships?

Without a partner there is loneliness – and for most people this appears worse than fighting or indifference.

Most people remain in an inappropriate career to continue earning money, ie to not be without money. And most people remain in an inappropriate partnership to not be alone. There is a similarity.

Partnership too is about security. It is about the security that there is someone – *any* one.

For some people a partnership is about financial or, more generally, economic security.

In the past this was the case primarily for women since they were expected to raise children and run the household.

A new partner/no partner, or a new career might be much better, more appropriate, or more beneficial than the status quo. But most people are not curious enough to be open to the fundamentally new or they are too scared to start something new.

Yet many people nevertheless sense that their status quo is not good for them either and thus they crave a change.

An outlet for this craving could be *temporary* changes.

Such as vacations.

Or adultery. Or sick leave. It makes no difference, if a disease is simulated or real. A disease can be caused by a life situation. Such a disease is called a psychosomatic disease. The psyche has arranged for a change.

We've had this experience. In our early twenties we worked as a software engineer for a big company for about six months. We really did not like the job and did it only for the money. After a while we got sick. We were on sick leave for weeks with fever and vague symptoms. After we quit the job, we recovered quickly.

**

Let's start with the question: Is curiosity natural?

How can we find out?

Let's look at nature. Where in nature do we see curiosity or, more precisely, where in nature do we see a behavior that *appears* to be curiosity?

When animals explore their environment they appear to be curious.

From a human perspective, this *appears* to be curiosity. But can this term be applied to animals? Do animals care? Do animals desire something new, ie something with which they are not familiar?

Why do we have doubt?

The art of truly curious research is to consider nothing as certain, no matter how certain or obvious it may appear. Einstein's research is a prime example of this. He questioned what appears obvious: the nature of space and time. And his curiosity paid off. He found that space and time indeed are different from what everybody believed.

Back to animals. Why do animals explore their environment?

A possible explanation would be that animals are permanently searching for food.

This would make sense because in nature there is no guarantee of finding the next meal.

We just observed a housefly. It landed on our arm and immediately began to soak up something with its proboscis. It looked like it fed. When we moved our arm, it flew away. Seconds later it landed again and continued to feed.

Something is wrong with the explanation
"permanent search for food."

Being curious means that we question everything.
But do we also question our own findings?

These we need to question in particular. Once we discover something, we must immediately question it and test it. There are a thousand ways to err. There are a thousand ways to persuade oneself. Only what has been questioned and tested over and over again and has passed all tests, only that has a *chance* of being true.

Being curious is pretty strenuous!

With *our* emphasis on the word pretty.

What's wrong with the explanation "*permanent search for food*"?

Animals spend a large portion of their lifetime feeding, but there is more to their lives than just food. Yesterday we hiked a mountain. While sitting at the summit, we observed six flying ravens. They used thermal updraft to ascend in big circles. They flew higher and higher. It seemed as if they simply enjoyed performing their flying – just like a human glider pilot would. It was beautiful, even uplifting to watch them. A housefly also often flies around a room for minutes without landing and feeding. If it was only for feeding, flying would be a method to get from A to B as fast as possible. But observations of nature suggest that it is more than that.

Some birds not only fly, they also sing – and there seems to be no connection between feeding and singing.

The daily routine of a songbird is comprised of feeding, flying, and singing. How about other animals?