

Curiosity

The Mental Hunger of Humans

Bernhard Kutzler

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2nd Edition

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1

This is the story of my exploration of curiosity. What made me explore curiosity? My curiosity, of course! I've always been very curious. Therefore, 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. So I often explored other topics. Ultimately, I ended my career in 2009 and began to explore consciousness, human behavior, and human potential.

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One day I decided to explore 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 was also 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 on 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 insatiable 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 come in so many 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 'Why?' and 'Why not?' in countless ways with all our senses and listening for answers. This stops when we grow up. Why?

A child's ravenous curiosity leads to its joy in and deep satisfaction with life. In fact, curiosity is the key to joy and satisfaction at any age. Can anyone become truly curious again?

Read on to learn what I found out.

I tell the story of my exploration of curiosity as a soliloquy because research is exactly that. I ask myself questions. I find answers. I question my answers. I find 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 consult a psychology book.

There we won't find what curiosity *is*. We would only find a description of the author's *perspective* of curiosity. Curiosity is much more than can be expressed with words.

That's true for everything. The best description of a red wine cannot replace tasting it. The best travel report about Hawaii cannot replace a trip there.

Let's explore curiosity ourselves.

How do we 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 vague, and therefore useless. What does it mean to 'know'? What is 'something'? What is 'eager'? Language is an important tool for our exploration. We must use words as precisely as possible. We can't base our

¹ I often speak to and about myself in the plural ... after all, I was born under the sign of Gemini, so, in the end, I am two. And already Goethe wrote: "*Two souls alas! are dwelling in my breast.*" Moreover, using "we" seems appropriate for a soliloquy.

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

What do we mean by 'original meaning of a word'?

Language is alive, and the meanings of words are constantly changing. This makes every communication a challenge. It's hard to know what someone wants to convey based on what he or she says or writes.

Let's take the word 'monk' as an example. It usually refers to 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 doesn't explain the words 'religious' and 'usually.'

In an oral conversation, you can ask. But with written text, you almost always have to guess what the author intends to express.

The original meaning of a word is defined by its roots. Typically, the roots are from an old language such as Latin or ancient Greek. Since these languages are no longer spoken, the meanings of their words don't change anymore. Moreover, the roots often provide deep insights into the essence of what they denote.

The word *monk* originates from the Greek word *monakhos*, which means "solitary." Its root is the Greek word *monos* (= *alone*).

Therefore, the original meaning of the word monk is a person who lives alone – regardless of gender and whether he or she is religious.

We find the origins of words in etymological dictionaries.²

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

Caring for something means focusing on it and doing something for it – such as when a mother cares for her child. However, curiosity is more than caring. Albert Einstein cared about what he was doing, but the essence of his “*passionate curiosity*,” as he put 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 therefore have the same Latin root *cure*. The words in German, Dutch, and Swedish also seem to have the same root(s). So it suffices to look at one of them.

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 we researched throughout this exploration.

The German word *Neugier* comprises 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)³ root **gher-* (= *to desire, like*). This is a less intensive form of longing than is expressed by the words *craving* or *greed*.

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

Let’s try a different route. ‘*New*’ is an adjective. When is something considered new?

A new car is a car that is fresh from a dealership.

How long is a new car new?

When we buy a new car, it’s still new to us after, say, a month. But for the car dealer, it is no longer new once we signed the purchase contract and registered the car.

How about ‘*new*’ when we buy a used car?

For us, it is still a new car.

³ From now on we use PIE as an abbreviation for ‘Proto-Indo-European.’

So, new can have two meanings:

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

(2) comes fresh into our life.

What's the essence of the difference?

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 smell no longer new?

When we no longer perceive it as a new smell.

In other words ...

When we got used to it.

When we got used to our new car, we no longer think of it as new. *Familiarization* kills newness. What kind of newness is meant by the word curiosity/Neugier?

A curious person desires something that is new to him or her. Therefore, curiosity is about the subjective new.

Since the subjective new is the unfamiliar, the unknown, curiosity/Neugier refers to a "*desire for something one does not know or is not familiar with.*"

We must keep in mind the aspect of caring from the English word curiosity. Einstein not only *desired* to find new knowledge about the universe, he *cared* about finding it.

To care about something means to give it your attention and to do something for or with it.

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

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Are people curious in this sense?

Hardly anyone is curious in this sense. People are creatures of habit.

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

But it should 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 make. The new cell phone should be new, but everything from the old phone should be transferable, so you can keep using it. And even if someone buys his or her first car, computer, or cell phone, the motive is usually not true curiosity.

Many people buy a product because it is fashionable.

Regarding the central themes of life, people want to keep what they have. They want to keep their *familiar* lives.

What are the central themes of life?

One is partnership. Many people stay in a partnership, even if it is fraught with strife or indifference. They stay because they are afraid of the changes a breakup would bring.

We know that from experience.

Another central theme of life is work. Most people have a career that doesn't suit them. Either their work doesn't fulfill them, or they experience negativity with aspects of it. This makes their job a burden, and they long for the workday to end before it even begins.

What's behind the fear of change? Why does someone stay in a career, even if it is not the right choice?

The job brings money, and you need money to live. Besides, what would the partner, the parents, the friends, or the neighbors say if you quit your job? It is not always easy to find a new one.

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

Security and social acceptance.

Why do people remain in unsuitable partnerships?

Without a partner there is loneliness – and for most people that is worse than quarreling or indifference.

Many people remain in an unsuitable career for fear of being without money. And many people remain in an unsuitable partnership for fear of being alone. There is a similarity.

Partnership is also about security. It's about the security that there is *someone* – no matter who.

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

In the past, this was often the case for women, as they were expected to raise the children and run the household. This might still apply in some cultures.

A new partner/no partner or a new career could be so much better than the status quo. But most people are not curious enough to allow the fundamentally new into their lives . Or they are too afraid to start something new.

Yet many people feel that the status quo is not good for them either and therefore crave a change.

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

Such as vacations.

Or adultery. Or sick leave. An illness could be simulated ... or caused by a life situation. In the latter case, the psyche has arranged for a change.

We've had this experience. At the age of 20, we worked as a software engineer. We didn't 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 unclear symptoms. After we quit the job, we got well quickly.

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

How can we find out?

Let's look into nature. Where in nature do we see curiosity or, rather, a behavior that *appears* as curiosity?

When animals explore their environment, they appear curious.

Does the term 'curiosity' apply to animals after all? Do animals care? Do animals desire something new, ie something they are not familiar with?

Why do we doubt?

The art of truly curious research is not to take anything as certain, no matter how certain or obvious it may seem. Einstein's research is a prime example. He questioned the seemingly obvious: the nature of space and time. And his curiosity paid off. He found that the nature of space and time differs from what everybody believed.