

Truth & Knowledge: A Catholic Philosophical Exploration of Our Restlessness and Desire to Know

Session 1: Is Knowledge Always Good?

- Dr. Josh Hren: The protagonist of Walker Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, says, "Whenever I feel bad, I go to the library and read controversial periodicals." He says, "I'm neither liberal nor conservative, but I confess that I'm enlivened by the hatred which one bears the other." Binx, the name of this protagonist, fancies himself being on an existential search, but he's plagued by a kind of sick attraction to this hatred that he has.
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- For him, knowledge is not a good end that he's seeking, but a means to this kind of titillating wrath, this pleasure that he takes in getting upset, worked up, and angry. Let's say that his dopamine levels have dipped a little bit. He'll plunk himself down in a chair with a liberal, weekly magazine and nod at each point that the author scores saying, "Damn right, old son, shaking his chair in impassioned approval." "Pour it on them," he'll shout.
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- But then he snatches a conservative monthly and drops down into a new chair. And soon he's totally lost in the counterattack, sure that the new points that the opposition is making have sunk their rivals roundly. Eventually he emerges from the library, his neck prickling with satisfaction. Binx embodies an extreme case of a vice called *curiositas*. This is a kind of intellectual morbidity or a curiosity to the point of covetousness. It's a kind of lustful interest or intrigue.
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- The desire to know is something that all men possess by their nature, Aristotle says. These are the opening lines of his *metaphysics*, right? He says, "All men by nature desire to know." We know this because we take delight just simply in sensing things, right? Whenever we sense something, before we make an intellectual judgment, we just simply take delight in that. Right? So even the knowledge that we ascertain through our senses is something that delights us. And so if even on the sort of lower level of the senses, we take delight, then has to be the case that on the highest levels of our intellect, right, it's also the fulfillment of that. That's the highest flourishing of that desire to know.
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- He says the reason this is that this coming to know makes us bring to light many differences between things. And it's only by making distinctions between things, things, right, that we can come to know the natures of things. And so there's a way in which this can manifest in a right understanding of, for example, the difference between body and soul, right? It's much easier to understand the nature of the essence of a soul if you also come to understand the nature of the essence of a book.
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- But there's also a corruption of that ability that we have, or that drive that we have to make distinctions between things, right? And this is where *curiositas* comes into play. Right? Notice Binx's pleasure that he takes, this kind of sick pleasure, in making distinctions between the liberals and the conservatives while remaining sort of totally detached from any level of commitment or any real investment in the consequences of coming to know things. And so all men desire to know, but between that desire to know and coming to know something, there's the problem of our appetites thing can kind of get in the way and lead us off track, right?
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[00:04:30] In his work, *De finibus*, Cicero, the Roman philosopher, celebrates what he calls the minds innate craving of learning. He calls it [foreign language 00:04:32], which we can and translate as a kind of lust for learning. Notice the difference between Aristotle's characterization and Cicero's is already that, in Cicero's case, he's picking up on the fact that coming to know is not just something that is sort of happening in a detached way, right, on the level of the intellect, but there's a lust involved in it he says. Right? There's this kind of impassioned draw.

[00:05:00] And he takes as an exemplary lover of wisdom the figure of a Odysseus. Odysseus is well-known for a lot of things. But if you remember passing through the *Odyssey*, the thing that he's best known for his unbelievable capacity to lie, right? He's an extraordinary liar. This was one of the things that makes him so fascinating as a hero, because it seems like he ought not to be celebrated for being so good at deceiving other people while he's simultaneously so infuriated if he himself is deceived by anybody else.

[00:05:30] But Cicero celebrates him because he will subject himself to all sorts of perils and suffering simply in order to come to know, right? Odysseus is in a real way kind of the first cosmopolitan, right. He travels all over the world to come to know the various cities, their customs, and he says the minds of the men who live there,

[00:06:00] But there's a problem with Odysseus that's kind of obvious in Homer's poem, even though Homer doesn't totally draw it out. And that is that he doesn't remain committed to any of these particular cities or these places, right. He moves from one place to another. In that sense he's a kind of cultural tourist, right? He's sort of interested in tasting this experience, but not deeply coming to a rootedness in a particular place, coming to know the particular laws of that place, let's say, in order that he can know what is right, what is good. In a way it's possible that his coming to know too many things in a multiplicity of places and things has led him into a kind of unwillingness to be committed, right?

[00:06:30] So in Dante's *Inferno*, he picks up on this aspect of Odysseus and he places Odysseus in the realm of the false counselors, those who give false advice, misleading, misguided advice to others. So Dante is playing with Cicero's idea of Odysseus' lust for knowledge, but he takes it to its logical end, or he plays it out to its extreme.

[00:07:00] This doesn't happen in Homer's poem. But it happens in Dante's version Odysseus. After Odysseus is finally able to leave Circe's island where he's been trapped for a really long time, apparently longing to go home. He longs to go home so badly that he actually weeps all day looking in the direction of his home. He can't stop crying so apparently he has wanted to go home. But in Dante's rendering of Odysseus instead of after getting off of Circe's island, leaving to go home, he overcome, he says, "by the lust and the longing, I had to gain experience of the world." And he kind of shames his men for wanting to return back to where they came from and says, "What kind of men are you? Aren't you seeking that kind of fullness of

[00:08:00]



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Session 1: Is Knowledge Always Good?

experience and knowledge. And if you are, then you ought to come with me."

[00:08:30] And he leads them in this ship literally across the edge of the known world and the episode ends in their being sort of swallowed up in this squall just at the moment that Odysseus and his men have seen what we come to find is the mountain of purgatory. And we know from reading the rest of Dante's poem, that it's not that coming to knowledge of what's going on in purgatory, or Mt. Purgatory, is in and of itself a bad thing. That knowledge in of itself is a good thing to acquire. Dante himself acquires it. But it's the means by which Ulysses/Odysseus and his men come to try to ascertain that. They kind of have this lustful willing of themselves into coming to know it, in a round about way sort of bypassing God and trying to seize that knowledge sort of on their own. Okay?

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[00:10:00] So it's clear then again, that we have these innate sort of tensions in human existence. And when we're students it's easy for us to continue to embody. It's easier, I should say for us to embody, Aristotle's sort of noble call, to remind us all men by their nature desire to know. When you're a student, what else would you want to hear that ennobles your daily life? Right?

[00:10:30] But think it's safe to say that after undergraduate life, unless you go onto graduate school, there's a way in which that thirst for knowledge, or that desire to know, can dissipate. Or rather, the desire to know is still there and it inevitably always will be there. We can't help but want to know things. But one of the difficulties is that we end up settling for the wrong objects of knowledge. So we might, instead of occasionally returning ourselves to Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, we might spend our time vacillating between different news articles like Binx Bolling, and sort of getting this pseudo-satisfaction of kind of halfway coming to know something. But mainly we're not really focused on the knowledge. We're focused on the titillation or the excitement of our passions that comes with that pursuit.

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[00:11:30] St. Augustine in his Confessions touches on this. He says that we are so... I'm just going to read from it, right? He says that we have this sort of hunger for the truth, but we also can come to hate the truth. Right? We know this because when we've proceeded in either a wrong relationship with coming to know for a really long period of time, or when we've proceeded in maintaining an erroneous opinion for a long period of time, right. When someone tries to correct us, we become upset unless we have a profound level of intellectual humility and he says, "We do not wish to be deceived." Right?

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[00:12:30] We don't wish to be deceived. None of us want to be deceived. But the unfortunate truth is that many of us deceive ourselves a lot of the time as Simone Weil, the 20th century philosopher says, we fictionalize our own lives most of our waking hours. We fictionalize the lives of our friends and our enemies most of our waking hours. We imagine them to be things that they're not. We imagine ourselves to be things that we're not.



Truth & Knowledge: A Catholic Philosophical Exploration of Our Restlessness and Desire to Know

Session 1: Is Knowledge Always Good?

And so we want to know the truth on the one hand, but then we don't want to if it's going to cause us pain. And so Augustine says, "We hate the truth for the sake of the object which we love instead of the truth." We love the truth for the light it sheds, but we hate it when it shows us up as being wrong. Okay?

[00:13:00] And what's involved in this sort of twisting of a good thing is he calls curiositas, right? Curiositas. And this is sort of the name that's given to this vice that I've been walking us through today. It's, he says, "A cupidity that does not take delight in carnal pleasure." So it does not take delight in the pleasures of the flesh. But

[00:13:30] instead in perceptions that are acquired through the intellect, through the mind, right? So we curiously pursue with a motive of seeing what experiences are like, but not with a wish to undergo discomfort, out of a lust of experiencing and knowing. And Augustine says in the sort of worst case scenario, this can manifest in what, in our common kind of vernacular, we would describe as bending our necks at a car wreck, something like that.

[00:14:00] Augustine makes the point even more palpable. He says, "What is it about us that makes us look at, for example, a mangled corpse?" Right? Why are we drawn to an experience that gives us this revulsion, or that should give us this kind of revulsion?

[00:14:30] And so sometimes it's not just the way in which we desire to know, or the reasons that we want to know something, but the objects of our knowledge itself that gets in the way of our growing in wisdom, right? We become too fixated on grotesque things, or in the pleasures of being able to say, "Well, there's something, it's weird. I'm looking at this other person suffering. And I realized that it's not because I want

[00:15:00] to do something to help that person, but I take a certain kind of pleasure and knowing that that person is suffering because I'm not actually undergoing the same difficulty that they are." And so he called this rather sort of a diseased craving, Augustine does. All right.

[00:15:30] So the question is then sort of how do we respond to this this possibility of our corruption of our desire to know. And Aquinas gives us a number of different insights in this regard. In the Summa Theologiae he says that, of course there's the vice of curiositas whereby we can take one of the highest things that we're given, which is our ability to know, and we can desire to know simply because we want to take pleasure in the pride that we received from knowing something that other

[00:16:00] people don't know. We become puffed up in our pride, he says. And so we need to develop as a kind of corrective to our inclination to curiositas the virtue of where he calls studiositas, which is a studiousness.

[00:16:30] And if we are inclined to be puffed up with pride, because we know more than other people, we need to literally invert that response and realize instead when we come to know something, "My goodness, I spent most of my life not knowing that thing that I now know." Right? How many other things are there that I did not know prior to coming to know that thing? And if we can extend our imagination in that regard, we realize there are a nearly infinite number of things that we do not know, and probably never will know. And that will promote, and sort of solicit from us is a better way of putting it, sort of an innate humility before all there is to know. That



Truth & Knowledge: A Catholic Philosophical Exploration of Our Restlessness and Desire to Know

Session 1: Is Knowledge Always Good?

[00:17:00] even if we do come to know a lot of things, it's inevitably going to be a smaller amount relative to the total possible things which could be known. Right? So that's part of a growing in studiositas to sort of offset this more detracting curiosity.

[00:17:30] Secondly, we need to develop the ability to rightly order the amount of time and attention and study that we give to different objects of knowledge. Right? So I mentioned Binx Bolling sitting down with his weekly periodicals. I almost hesitate to even bring up all the kind of cliches of social media, because everybody's always sort of railing against these things, and it's almost just painfully clear to a point that it doesn't even need to be said, that these are incredible occasions for the dissipation of our mind in multiple directions that we don't need to spend our time going. Right?

[00:18:00] And so I'll sort of leave that be and take that for granted that that is a major reason why we turn away from the pursuit of higher knowledge. Right? But Aquinas also gives examples of, let's say, a priest he says who ought to be preparing to give his homily. And instead of reading the gospel, he gets caught up in reading a stage play, or a love poem. And he says it's not that the love poem is wrong for the priest to read. It's not that it's wrong for us to read a stage play, or to go to see Shakespeare performed. There's nothing wrong with that. The difficulty in developing the virtue of studiositas though, is that we have to be able to discern prudentially when is the right time to be devoted to, let's say, these less profitable forms of study that still maybe produce the light, and can bring us joy, and can give us a kind of sense of relief.

[00:18:30] When is it right to engage in those things? And when ought we to instead pull out Augustine's Confessions or the Summa Theologiae? This is a really difficult question to wrestle with because the objects and the monumental grandeur of works like Augustine's City of God, or the Confessions, or Aquinas are so great that you could spend the rest of your life just reading them, and never get bored, and never get tired and never exhaust them. And yet you would have to begin to use your prudence to work through the different obligations and duties that you have in your life, and to say, in an election year for example, maybe I ought to spend more time than I typically do, especially being attentive to the particularities of this law or that candidate's policy, instead of spending the amount of time that I would reading even these higher texts or books. Okay?

[00:19:00] Another thing that we need to do to move from curiosity to studiousness is to study creatures, or all created things, which for Aquinas is everything except for God, everything he would see as a created thing or creature. When he says creature, he doesn't mean just like oxen or cows as we usually use the word, but just anything that's not God, because it's created. When we're studying creatures, whether we're looking at a tree and admiring its beauty, or we're studying physics, to not be moved by empty and perishable... sort of the inclination that we have to just allow our minds to rest in those creative things, without passing through them to our final end, which is always God. Right?



Truth & Knowledge: A Catholic Philosophical Exploration of Our Restlessness and Desire to Know

Session 1: Is Knowledge Always Good?

[00:21:00] So Augustine also uses a similar example. He says that when he comes home sometimes he can't help but look at these lizards, and it's kind of a weird thing that he finds himself doing. He's like, "Why am I so fascinated by looking at these lizards swallowing flies?" And at first he comes down pretty hard on himself for what seems like wasting his time doing that. But it's actually the case, he says, that what starts out as maybe a sort of vice of curiosity, just sort of dwelling and looking at that maybe longer than he needs to, it eventually turns into a good kind of wonder and awe. And he can't help but then, by the end of his sort of session staring at this lizard eating flies, praise God for the wonder of this thing that's made, that he kind of could partially understand scientifically, but that there's a component of it that remains perpetually a mystery to him. And it remains mysterious because only God can know this thing in its totality.

[00:22:30] The final thing that Aquinas advises in terms of moving from curiosity to studiousness is, of course, this all requires us to, to know ourselves. That's something that surely you've heard an infinite amount of times, and it's notoriously difficult to actually succeed at doing that. Right? Just when we thought that we knew ourselves, then we find ourselves doing something that is contrary to what we wanted ourselves to do. And then we say, "Okay, there's something about me that I still don't fathom or understand." Right? But it is possible to come to some degree of good self knowledge, and what that results in, then, is that we know that there are certain kinds of knowledge that we maybe by nature just are not able to come to fully know in a way that increases our wisdom or in a way that makes it so that we genuinely and truly understand that thing that we're studying. Right?

[00:23:30] I'm sure that all of you had particular subjects that you struggled through and found extraordinarily difficult to the point that you wanted to give up. And obviously it's good that you didn't give up. And what Aquinas is not saying is if something is innately difficult, you should just sort of abandon it. Right? But he does say that there's a way in which our appetite can be confused so that we want to know things that are beyond our capacity for sort of dubious reasons. Right? Again, we might want to know that thing because it'll make us look good, or because there are these certain pursuits that we've always had a hard time with and we can't accept the fact that we always will have a hard time with it. So we spend a lot of time throwing ourselves into these particular pursuits of knowledge that continuously, over and over again, never get us very far. Right?

[00:24:30] And there's a way in which to some degree that could be a sort of sign of magnanimity or greatness of soul. There's a courage that's involved in doing that to a certain extent. But there's a way Aquinas would suggest, too, that it's also kind of foolish, right? Because you have to be humble enough to come to know what it is that you can excel in most deeply. Right? And especially if you have after undergraduate, when the leisure that you have to just throw yourself into study is sort of taken away, you have to be more careful than ever to determine what it is that's worth sort of devoting yourself to and increasing your knowledge.

[00:25:00] And so coming to avoid those things that would be extraordinarily burdensome to



Truth & Knowledge: A Catholic Philosophical Exploration of Our Restlessness and Desire to Know

Session 1: Is Knowledge Always Good?

you, or burdensome in a way that would detract from your ability to come to know other things that you know that you could advance more easily in might be a way to sort of develop, again, studiousness as opposed to giving into curiosity.

- [00:25:30] Just to end. So Aquinas calls curiosity or curiositas the first born daughter of sloth. Right? So oftentimes when we think of sloth, we think of this kind of caricature of somebody laying down in a couch, sort of passed out with fast food across their lap or something, and they're sleeping at 3:00 PM. And so there's this sense that we have of sloth being totally passive and just sort of not doing anything. But for Aquinas sloth also manifests in a kind of restlessness of spirit. Right? He depicts it as a roaming unrest of the spirit, an unwillingness to be at home with ourselves. Right? It may mean, he says, that we've lost our capacity to live with ourselves. This is the phrasing of Josef Pieper, who's an interpreter of Aquinas.
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- What if we have gotten to the point in our lives where we still give in to our desire to know, but solely in terms of, or mostly in terms of, giving into this insatiability of curiositas. Seeking with a kind of anxiety a thousand futile paths. Seeking with kind of anxiety a thousand futile paths instead of giving into our nobler nature. Surrounding ourselves with what Josef Pieper calls a perpetual moving picture of meaningless shows instead of keeping custody over our eyes, in the sense of limiting the amount of pursuits of knowledge that we will engage in. Right? Because we know that we've made a prudential decision beforehand to determine that which is most profitable for us to know at any given point.
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