

## On Curiosity: or, the Difference Between an Ideologue and a Scholar

A few years ago a reporter for National Public Radio went to a college campus at the start of the academic year and asked a few entering freshmen why they wanted to go to college. Most said they needed to prepare for careers, or that their parents wanted them to get degrees, or that there was nothing else to do before the time came when they had to assume the responsibilities of adult life. There was only one exception to this pattern; one girl replied, "I guess I'm just a dilettante. But I just want to learn about everything." This reply sums up both the mutual exclusiveness of the Scholar and the Ideologue and the deadly consequences of current ideological fashions.

Progressivist ideologues have, for many years, been denouncing traditional methods in the elementary and high schools for, among other sins, suppressing children's natural curiosity. The accusation is largely false, but that is another matter. These same ideologues have been busy for many years inaugurating "reforms" guaranteed to dampen that curiosity. They have also been telling us that disinterested scholarship is immoral because its motivation is the satisfaction of curiosity rather than the ending of war, poverty, and oppression. They have not told us at what age curiosity changes from a child's virtue into an adult's vice. Perhaps the young woman who admitted to wanting to learn for the sheer joy of learning had attended schools that had escaped the "reforms" of the progressivists; or she managed somehow to retain her thirst for learning despite their "relevant" courses and methods. Yet she had already begun to be in-

fluenced by the fashionable notion that college study should be oriented toward solving what *ideologues* have identified as social problems, by means *they* have already decided upon, under the aegis of theories *they* have decided are true—and that study motivated by curiosity is dilettantish and manifests callousness toward the victims of war, poverty, and oppression.

I do not know whether that student has, in the intervening years, succeeded in maintaining her autonomy despite the stigmatization of intellectual curiosity as not just odd but immoral. What is certain is that her hunger for knowledge is not as rare as one might infer after reading the typical campus newspaper, scanning the titles and purposes of most campus organizations, and noting the contents of most newly-invented courses. True, most college students have no more intellectual curiosity than most nonscholars. But among the lucky minority of every population who continue growing all their lives—and intellectual curiosity is the hunger for the food that enlarges the personality—there are many who resemble that girl. It requires enormous pressure, from peers and professors, to squelch their curiosity.

For instance, in the January 1978 issue of

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Aileen S. Kraditor is Professor of History at Boston University and the author of numerous essays and books in the field of American history. She is also the co-editor of the new history journal, *Continuity* (see p. 100).

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*The American Spectator*, Mary C. Norton recounted what happened at a conference of Danforth Fellows, all very bright students destined for outstanding careers. Of the fifty-one, the left minority was so aggressive, claiming to have the aforementioned monopoly on "moral" concern, as to appear to be the majority. The others, wrote Norton, "keep their concerns to themselves. Many lose their confidence in the face of all this political activism, and wonder if maybe their particular moral and ethical concerns are rather paltry in comparison to, say, those of a Marxist-Leninist feminist."

The basic reason for the effectiveness of this moral pressure is, however, not moral at all, but the absence of countervailing forces. When the only authority available for young people to lean on is that of their own peer group (the grownups having abdicated that role), the ideological influence is one aspect of the group's broader hegemony that includes the pressure to accept its sexual mores, clothing fashions, and taste in music. And out of this milieu come the new members of the New Class, a few of whom join that contingent of the New Class called "scholars" but who should really be called ideologues. Those few also include that small minority who become real Scholars, for the scholarly vocation is the only one that permits intellectual curiosity to be the motive force of a person's working life.

There is, of course, a basic difference between the curious child and the adult Scholar, aside from the vast difference in knowledge and the skill in using it, and that is the difference in how the curiosity is satisfied. A negative instance may make this clear. In *Insight and Outlook* (1949, pp. 241 ff), Arthur Koestler perceptively explores some implications of intellectual curiosity, but his own curiosity resembles the child's more than the Scholar's. Koestler's nonfiction books are motivated by admirable curiosity about far more subjects than any Scholar could master—from biology to psychology and from the nature of creativity to a "creative" history of the lost tribes of Israel—and he can write on so many because *he lets his curiosity be satisfied too soon.*

The child asks questions of grownups and, when older, reads books, and accepts what they tell him. The plausible answer is sufficient, and he goes on to the next subject. The Scholar, however, *starts* with the plausible answer and then attacks it with all the factual and logical resources at his command. Even if he believes passionately that his hypothesis is right, he knows that other members of the scholarly community do not; if he does not find the flaws in it, they will. The Scholar does not, of course, question his hypothesis merely out of fear of what his colleagues may think. Rather, he knows that the reciprocal criticism within the scholarly community is essential to the progress of scholarship. One difference between the child or adult polymath and the Scholar is hence due in part to the latter's belonging to a scholarly community, which demands that new hypotheses prove themselves by defeating challenges.

An infallible sign of the difference between the Scholar and the Ideologue is the presence or absence of intellectual curiosity; all the other differences between them flow from or relate to this one.

**T**o possess curiosity means, first of all, to say "I don't know, and I want to find out." The first clause implies humility; the second, courage. Together they manifest the Scholar's attitude toward his subject-matter: recognition that he does not understand something, and willingness to encounter whatever he turns up. He is therefore agnostic concerning both what he will find and what the experience will mean to him personally. The Ideologue's counterpart of curiosity is apriorism. He "knows" in advance what all newly-discovered data will mean, and he knows they will not change him. So he predicts confidently, because he has made sure that further information will pose no danger to his beliefs or his ego. The Correct Theory is his intellectual security blanket; it enables him to have power over the universe by knowing where each thing or person fits into the readymade framework. There is nothing more threatening to him than a datum that can neither be fitted in the

Theory nor be ignored. Every open-ended question opens the possibility that his Ideology will be shown not to encompass all pertinent data, that it will not be able to explain all of them; in short, that it is not true. And since his need for it is stronger than his curiosity about his subject-matter, genuine curiosity conflicts with his reason for believing in his Ideology in the first place. Since the unknown poses a constant threat of extruding disconfirming data, he preinterprets everything it contains. The threat is exorcised by prediction—prediction not only of the results of research but also of the effect of his scholarly labors on his own beliefs. Fear and arrogance thus are correlatives, as are courage and humility.

To possess intellectual curiosity means, second, that one's ego is not entangled with the explanations that one accepts at a given time concerning the subject-matter in one's field. Here too the difference between children and grownups is instructive. The child, with an embryonic ego, is open to all experience and "tries out" many personalities as he constructs an ego step by step, and hence does not hesitate to change his mind and admits the change in public. The adult, however, is supposed to be competent in practical affairs and with respect to the tools of his trade. Intellectual curiosity in an adult is thus one of the signs of a strong ego; its possessor is unafraid of new experience and of changing his mind in public. In the Scholar the strong ego is also the growing ego, reaching out for new experience in the knowledge that it could disprove what he believes, and willing for it to be so. He knows, in other words, that such a change would not shatter his world but would in fact widen it, for he identifies himself, in part, not with what he knows but with the act of inquiry.

To possess intellectual curiosity within the context of a scholarly community means, third, a separation between the joy of learning and one's social conscience. To the Ideologue this separation is nothing less than criminal indifference to war, poverty, and oppression. But since the Scholar is as likely

as others to have a social conscience and to engage in political activity and good works, the charge of irrelevance and callousness conflicts with empirical evidence and is itself ideological. It is an expression of the Ideologue's obsessive need to make all activities and interests serve the ideology's single goal. He himself feels guilty when he observes within himself any interest or feels any enjoyment that cannot be construed as serving the goal; he must not feel joy when people are suffering from war, poverty, and oppression. Yet even though he may not admit the fact, he became a scholar because he did feel drawn to the life of the mind. Hence he rationalizes his "irresponsible" curiosity, his enjoyment of learning, by making scholarship "relevant" to the goal of abolishing war, poverty, and oppression. If he is a historian, he projects his self-image onto history as well: the only people in the past whom he perceives as both happy and good were those who struggled against war, poverty, and/or oppression. Like Mencken's Puritan, he is haunted by the fear that anyone else, somewhere, some time, may have been happy.

For the Scholar, however, personal need does not predetermine what he will find in the course of his research. He distinguishes between the *academic* nature of scholarly inquiry, which requires all explanations of scholarly subject-matter to be provisional and dependent wholly on evidence that is independent of his wishes, and the world of action. In the latter context, one must act as if one knew all the relevant facts; the world of action hence always has a moral dimension in that one must take the likely consequences of one's actions into account. Similarly, the Scholar distinguishes between his own feelings in the two realms, and accords each its appropriate legitimacy. His sole moral responsibility toward the materials of scholarship is to seek the truth, and the appropriate feeling in that realm is the joy of discovery.

The possession of intellectual curiosity means, fourth, a distinction between the Scholar's ultimate beliefs, his personal

philosophy or religion, on the one hand, and the middle-range hypotheses and theories pertinent to scholarship, on the other. The Ideologue homogenizes these two levels of belief, just as he homogenizes scholarship and "real life." The attitude toward reality that enables a person to be a Scholar—the attitude that accepts the boundaries of things, the multifariousness of the world, the autonomy of distinct realms—also encourages respect for the intrinsic nature of the object of inquiry. The Ideologue, by contrast, is a system-thinker: all aspects of the world of nature and man must be explained directly by a single theory that defines them in terms not of their own natures but of their connections and relevance to the one goal.<sup>1</sup>

This difference in attitude between the Scholar and the Ideologue is shown by their reactions when they encounter facts that their theories cannot accommodate. The Scholar changes his theory, because it does not function, for him, as an ideology, an obligatory part of an ultimate world-view operating in all aspects of his life. The Ideologue ignores or distorts the significance of such data, which hold no intrinsic interest for him and which he considers real only insofar as they support his theory. That is why the Ideologue's books are so predictable. The Scholar, whose theories are not coextensive with his personal world-view, changes the former as the data require, and he organizes the data as the latest plausible hypothesis requires, and so on back and forth in the course of his scholarly career. As a result, the reader who follows his work for

a long time cannot predict what his next book will say; nor can the Scholar himself.

The fifth implication of intellectual curiosity is its randomness. Because the Scholar is captivated by the intrinsic interest of his subject-matter, he does not choose his projects according to instrumental criteria. The Ideologue, by contrast, is forever telling his colleagues that they "must" study "relevant" things. As was pointed out above, he knows in advance what the results of research will be. And since he tells us which topics we "must" study and which are "irrelevant," he is in effect claiming possession, as the voice of moral responsibility, of both the start and the end of research, both the questions asked and the answers "found." It is therefore the Scholar who is more likely to make fruitful discoveries while at the same time he knows that false leads and waste of effort are their inevitable by-products. The fruitful discoveries occasionally made by the Ideologue are solely those that happen to fit into his *a priori* paradigm, but even with these discoveries it is the Scholar alone who can discover their significance beyond the confines of the Ideologue's theory.

All five of these traits of the Ideologue in the guise of the Scholar can be found in all scholarly disciplines—but are of course most obvious and damaging in those that deal with man, the possessor of free will.

In *Community Power and Political Theory* (1963), for example, Nelson W. Polsby analyzed the best-known works in stratification theory and discovered that in all cases the authors had assumed the truth of certain propositions, such that the "results" of their inquiries "proved" their starting assumptions, because they had omitted disconfirming evidence. Polsby decided to treat those propositions as mere hypotheses and hence open to question, and as a result he discovered evidence that showed them to be false. In fact, in some instances those authors had included those data, but their unquestioned paradigm had prevented them from perceiving their significance. "Stratification studies," Polsby explained, "make five assertions

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1. It is therefore the Ideologue alone whose work is described by Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigms; the Ideologue is a "problem-solver," working solely to fill the evidential gaps in the unquestioned theory. The Scholar's work is better described by Stephen Toulmin's theory that recognizes that scholars do accept the multiplicity and questionability of paradigms, corresponding to the multiplicity and unsystematic relationships of institutions in society over time. See Toulmin, *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 128-30 and *passim*.

about power in American communities.” They are: “1. The upper class rules in local community life....2. Political and civic leaders are subordinate to the upper class....3. A single ‘power elite’ rules in the community....4. The upper-class power elite rules in its own interests....5. Social conflict takes place between the upper and lower classes.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, “the fact that so many studies of community power have been heavily influenced by stratification theory...is surely an interesting social fact in itself.”<sup>3</sup> Polsby adopted a pluralist hypothesis, not because he was sure it was true, but because as a method of inquiry it would permit either the pluralist or the unitary hypothesis to prove itself true, whereas the reverse does not hold; that is, inquiry conducted on the basis of the unitary-power hypothesis would not permit the pluralist hypothesis to be shown to be true. In short, the unitary, power-elite hypothesis concerning social stratification is used by its advocates as an ideology, or part of an ideology, excluding alternatives at the outset.

James Q. Wilson’s findings, in *Thinking about Crime* (1975), yield the same judgment concerning the writings of the most respected criminologists. Again and again he found that they had been assuming what they should have been investigating—propositions concerning the motives for crime, the effects of rehabilitation programs, the attitudes of the police toward the community, the effect of the death penalty, judges’ sentencing policies, and so on. Again and again he found that

the sources of policy recommendations were not empirical studies of the relevant facts and of the effects of their implementation where they had already been in effect for some time, but were ideological postulates about the nature of man and of our society that often contradicted well-known facts. Wilson’s main conclusion was that

*we can try to learn more about what works, and in the process abandon our ideological preconceptions about what ought to work.... I hope we can learn to experiment rather than simply spend, to test our theories rather than fund our fears. This is advice, not simply or even primarily to government—for governments are run by men and women who are under irresistible pressures to pretend they know more than they do—but to my colleagues: academics, theoreticians, writers, advisers. We may feel ourselves under pressure to pretend we know things, but we are also under a positive obligation to admit what we do not know and to avoid cant and sloganizing. (pp. 208-9)*

Wilson was, in short, recommending that scholarship replace ideology—in terms of this essay, that the humility and courage of the curious Scholar replace the arrogance and cowardice of the incurious Ideologue.

Unfortunately, the freshman who told the reporter that she wanted to learn about everything has by now taken far more courses with the sort of professors criticized by Polsby and Wilson than with the sort exemplified by Polsby and Wilson. One cannot help wondering whether she has managed to retain her curiosity—that is to say, her humility and her courage.

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2. Polsby, pp. 8-11. The propositions are italicized in the original.

3. Polsby, p. 11.