

ON CURIOSITY

“**J**ACK, be quiet,” cried Mrs. Beeby to her husband. “Can’t you see I’ve got an idea !” She was sketching rapidly and intently the first rough outlines of a drawing. All Mrs. Beeby’s drawings were exquisite.

The Professor sniggered.

“You never had an idea in your life, my sweet,” he said. “Given an idea, you wouldn’t be a woman—much less the adorable woman that I love.”

The Professor was wrong, as professors frequently are. But the excitement of a brilliant course of lectures in metaphysics was still upon him, and he was unconsciously soothing himself by making playful (and erroneous) application of things he had read and thought and spoken about of late, copiously and in the orthodox abstract professorial way.

He said much more, and his wife, for all her industrious drawing, contradicted him cleverly. Yet their pretty war of words is of no more concern to us here than the prettier truce of hearts of which it was a graceful camouflage. For this, good reader, by your leave, is not a love story. It is a solemn attempt to discuss, in a practical and homely way, some of the very big things professors expound grandiloquently and in moods not always consonant with common sense.

The Professor very justly rebuked his wife for saying that it was an idea which impelled her skilful pencil. It was a fancy, suggestive of ten million ideas and imperative of none ; as always happens when a woman works divinely, unless she work laboriously in verse.

But the Professor very unjustly rebuked his wife of never having had an idea in her life. For his wife, like every other woman, was inquisitive ; and like

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every other woman, she generally spied out whatever she wished to know.

Now inquisitiveness—or curiosity—is an infallible sign, in him or her who has it, of a capacity for ideas. And the satisfaction of curiosity is proof that an idea has been begotten.

Curiosity, they say, killed the cat. But it didn't. If anything, it was lust of the eyes or lust of the flesh and a trap prepared that killed the cat. It may be that enough women have perished in the same way to justify the occasional comparison of the feminine race to the feline race. But it can never be that a woman's *curiosity* should justify her being called a cat. A woman's curiosity proves simply that she is a human being.

Curiosity, apart from the little frailties, amiable or otherwise, by which it may be motivated now and then, is obviously nothing more than the desire to know. It expresses itself to itself by saying "I wonder. . . ." It expresses itself to others by asking questions. To desire to know, to wonder, to ask questions, are the precise and prophetic signs of human nature in the ascendant. To know, to marvel, to answer all one's questions finally, is to show that manhood has attained its zenith. No monkey, it would seem, is distraught with the desire to know; nor can we suppose that it would blissfully forgo nuts for all the wisdom of the ancients. Cats, or at least tom-cats, would surely betray the first emotions of wonder by twisting those notoriously communicative moustachios of theirs; and might they not reasonably be expected to look pleasant when understanding came? The fact that brutes do none of these things may have ceased to interest you long ago. But there comes a day to most men and women wherein they are intensely interested by it. It is the day your child begins to pester you with endless questions, and you find yourself able to

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answer some of them. You rejoice in that day, for that you surely know your son is better than a brute idiot, and will be a man one day, please God ; and you, thank God, are something of a man yourself.

To be capable of asking questions and answering them is to be capable of ideas. This will appear from a consideration of all the possible questions that can be asked, even by the most curious, and answered, even by the most intelligent.

If a thing excites my curiosity, this must be either because I do not understand the thing itself, or because I do not understand its relation to other things. If my curiosity centres on the thing itself, I either want to understand the "works" or I want to know of what "stuff" it is made. If I am interested in its relation to other things, I want to know what it "has to do" with other things ; how it affects them or is affected by them.

The answer to these questions gives me, as we say, "some idea" of the thing in question.

When I have thus formed some idea of it, I may go on to ask certain further questions about it quite different from the above. Having, for instance, acquired some idea of the sea-serpent, I might proceed to ask "Whether it exists?" and if so "In what predicament? What place? What time? What size? What shape?" and so forth. The answers to these questions are not ideas newly conceived, but facts hitherto unobserved. If I now proceed to discover them, it is because I am following up a clue supplied by ideas already acquired—ideas of existence, place, time and the rest.

Possibly the name of curiosity might be given to the habit of asking such questions as these, which lead, not to ideas, but to experiences. It would not, however, be the curiosity of women and other normal human beings, but of professors. The more usual modern

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name for it is Science, or Research. It is not on the whole an intelligent habit as your common curiosity is. It is because the education of his day had not taught him that, nor taught him clearly anything of ideas or intelligence, that Professor Beeby offered his stupid, but well-meant, insult to his wife. The only ideas he recognized for such were theories, like Evolution and the rest—very doubtful answers to very difficult questions.

It may be of some interest and profit to the reader to dwell at some length on the questions which ordinary curiosity asks, and the answers with which it is satisfied. If we believe that all human beings, including women and children, are intelligent, and if we recognize that all human beings, especially women and children, are inquisitive in proportion to their intelligence, may we not reasonably expect that an examination of curiosity will lead us to a better appreciation of what intelligence is, and what ideas are? After all, that is what Aristotle and the Schoolmen did, in the days before Philosophy became a mystery and Science a shibboleth.

Whenever I handle anything new or strange I am immediately interested to know four things about it.

(1) I want to know what it is made of; whether it is wood, iron, lead, tin, silver, gold, compost, wool, cotton, silk, shoddy or what not.

(2) I want to know how it is made, or (if it is an instrument) how it works. I want so to understand an apple as to know how it is different from an orange; and that over and above the obvious difference which my senses show me. I want to know what makes iron iron, and lead lead. I want to know what makes a man a man, and God God.

(3) I want to know who made everything, and how things came to be as they are. I cannot see Hamlet without wondering who he was that wrote it and how he did it. If I receive an anonymous letter, I cannot

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help wondering who sent it. I am interested in the history and origin of everything I know—myself included.

(4) I am most intensely curious to know the reason of things, and especially of things which seem pointed at me. I like to understand the purpose of a machine, and the meaning of a sign. I like to know where a road is making for when I see it starting from the village green. I ask what men are going to build when I see them putting up their scaffolding. I speculate where the age is leading us to, and (when I have the courage, and the grace) ask myself where I am heading for myself. I am interested in the motives of other people, and especially of the people I desire or fear.

The philosophers tell us that philosophy is the knowledge of things in their causes; and they say that there are four causes; two intrinsic—formal and material, and two extrinsic—efficient and final. Therefore are we all philosophers in embryo; for the four directions which our curiosity takes are each leading towards one of the four things which are learnedly designated by these names. A “cause” in the philosophic sense is merely the answer to a question. A philosopher is no more than a man (rarely a woman; they have too much sense) who asks himself interminable questions, saying all the while, “I wonder.” And just as every question can be asked with a *Why*, so every answer can be framed with a *Because*. Because it is a cause.

But our common curiosity is more than embryonic philosophy, it is embryonic wisdom—which is understanding married to love. Understanding seeks truth, which is to us vision. But love seeks good, which is to us bliss. Ultimately vision and bliss are one; even as ultimately truth and goodness are one. Philosophers and esthetes are prone to divorce truth and goodness. But the common sense of ordinary folks unites them.

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The questions of the philosopher will indeed bring him to the Great Idea who is both true and good ; but it will reveal Him as no more than an idea, not as the living, loving Word that He is. And the esthete, if his love for the good be sure, will indeed find the One True Good ; but shrouded in forms and fantasies, not as the intelligible Light in which even light is seen. The common herd of us, however, have in our native curiosity a surer hope of finding goodness and truth combined ; for we seek them both together.

The questions which curiosity asks expect God for their answer, as surely as the questions of philosophy expect Him. If we persevere in asking what all things are made of, we shall eventually stumble upon the answer (upon which philosophy is constrained to insist) that they were first made of nothing, by omnipotence. If we never tire of asking why things are as they are we shall reply at length with the philosophers : because omniscience conceived them so. If we push back as far as it will go our question : " Who made everything ? "—once more the sage's answer will be ours : the maker unmade and self-existent.

Meanwhile in all this inquiry we shall be urged on by love—the love of knowledge. Not quite the same love of knowledge as the philosopher's, whose love is more of knowing than of the thing known ; but rather the love of the adventurer lured on by the unknown.

But in the last question of the curious another and a^rgreater love comes into play : the love of love. For the question is (for all but philosophers) a question of love. The " reason why " of anything is the intention or purpose or motive of him who did it or made it ; in a better word, his love. For love underlies every intention and purpose and motive ; that which philosophers call final causality, and which they not unfrequently speak of as though it were an abstract tendency in things, is always in fact the love of a

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lover for a thing loved. And our extreme curiosity about motives arises from our desire to be ourselves the thing loved. The curiosity about motives is the characteristic curiosity of women ; because nature, which has fashioned them to be wives and mothers, has given to them more intensely than to mere males, the desire to be loved, and the intelligent appreciation of the importance of love. If this curiosity is oftentimes their chief frailty, it is because in it love is mingled with intelligence ; and the law of love, which is morality, is more conspicuous when broken than the laws of thought. In a good woman curiosity is a proof both of morality and intelligence.

Professor Beeby ought to have remembered that.

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