



# CURIOSITAS

42<sup>nd</sup> Kölner Mediaevistentagung

7.-11. September 2020

Universität  
zu Köln





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Hans Blumberg considered the rehabilitation of theoretical curiosity the most outstanding epochal feature of the modern era, as opposed to Antiquity and, above all, the Middle Ages. This rehabilitation was also regarded the most crucial reason for the modern understanding of science, which was in previous times impeded not least due to the theologically motivated *curiositas* reservation and prohibition. One of the earliest historical witnesses to this is Augustine who, subsequent to Roman Stoicism and in engagement with Manichaeism and Gnosticism, describes *curiositas* as a misguided, conceited, and pernicious curiosity which lacks any sapiential orientation towards the eternal and divine and thus has to be considered a cardinal vice. In this, the “lust of the eyes” (*concupiscentia oculorum*) becomes a model of being curiously left to the world of sensible phenomena.

Augustine’s definition and understanding of *curiositas* was indeed highly acclaimed. Historically and conceptually, it defines the discourse concerning theoretical understanding in the Latin West. At this, the notion of *curiositas* seems to be predetermined: as a vice, the *vana curiositas* complements the *concupiscentia*, which is disoriented and self-referentially directed at the wrong objects (theater, magic, the stars, desire). Moreover, *curiositas* is understood as a defective form of the *studium veritatis cognoscendae*, which emanates from an *inordinatio appetitus*, and as such as instigating the Fall.

However, the question concerning theoretical curiosity is not answered by this. This does not only hold true for the Latin-speaking area, which was not at all entirely committed to this critical perspective; it even more applies to those cultural realms in which Augustine neither historically nor conceptually initiated the discourse on theoretical curiosity. The common reference point is a much older counter-narrative, which can be found right at the beginning of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. It is the story of the primate of theoretical curiosity, depicting it as a natural desire, a *desiderium naturale sciendi*, which is anthropologically existential, being positively preformed in

the curiosity of the visual sense (*aisthesis, visus*). The essence of theoretical curiosity, which is justified by its mere actualization and does not need another *raison d'être*, is furthermore based on the freedom and self-fulfillment of the human being.

This ideal is not fully abrogated at the end of Antiquity to then be rediscovered and re-justified in modern times. Instead, it persists in those cultural areas which continually adhere to the late antique Hellenistic culture of the Aristotelian exegetical tradition and share and refine its ideal of theoretical curiosity and the concomitant understanding of science. In its encounter with the equally theoretical claims of the by now theologically reflective revealed religions, new questions and issues arise, especially with regard to the scope, potential dangers, and limits of theoretical curiosity. In this, the knowledge of God becomes the touchstone of the theoretical quest for knowledge, lying between hubris and divinization, which, however, may no longer be solely the result of one's own cognitive achievement. All of this is reflected by the notion of *curiositas* as well as related terms, which yet await a systematic analysis. The human being who wants to be like God, who sups with the devil, the fallen angel or demon as someone who has dangerous or forbidden knowledge and who seeks to tempt and seduce those who are curious — all of these motifs reflect the fact that human curiosity is not a mere power of nature, which automatically targets someone, but that one is indeed responsible for one's theoretical knowledge.

The 42<sup>nd</sup> *Kölner Mediaevistentagung* will be concerned with the rehabilitation of theoretical curiosity in precisely those thousand years which are commonly called Middle Ages. This long millennium — which sees itself in continuity with Antiquity and which, in many respects, reaches well into the modern era — is so diverse that a period-specific labeling, which tries to narrow a complex situation down to one term, soon loses its initial plausibility. A temporally and spatially comprehensive examination shall thus take the place of a normative evaluation, in order to trace the terminological, motivic, and conceptual development of theoretical curiosity within the field of theoretical, cultural, institutional, and religious determinants and, at the same time, liberate it from its Eurocentric and epochal constrictions.

## The broadness of the possible spectrum of subjects for the 42<sup>nd</sup> Kölner Mediaevistentagung will be exemplarily indicated in the following.

1. First, the semantic field of theoretical curiosity shall be examined. Which terms are complementary to *curiositas*, and what are their connotations? Which equivalents do we find in Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew, but also in vernacular languages? Was there a shift in meaning due to translation processes? Connected to this, there is a comparative epistemology of differentiating between “right” and “wrong” attitudes towards knowledge acquisition and corresponding methods.
2. What does it mean to take a theoretical attitude? Are there cultural differences, or is there a shift in meaning concerning the theoretical attitude, for instance, regarding the contrast between allegedly “pure” theory and benefit, between knowledge acquisition and mere subsistence? Does the, in Antiquity prevalent, understanding that theoretical curiosity is not primarily geared towards making life possible but towards making it happy undergo changes?
3. What are the preferred (academic) subject areas of theoretical curiosity? Astronomy, which is already the starting point of the peculiar theoretical interest in Aristotle? Theology, which is concerned with the highest and absolute itself, with theory for the sake of theory? Natural wonders, which originate from natural phenomena or divine intervention?
4. As a *desiderium naturale*, theoretical curiosity is an anthropological existential which needs to be defined more clearly. To what extent is *curiositas*, in its ambiguity, an expression of this existential, and which consequences does this have concerning the question of its legitimacy? Is it possible for a human being to not want to know something? Are we Faustian by nature?
5. With this, the question of crossing boundaries arises again. Is there a natural level of theoretical curiosity? Or is it geared towards its complete actualization in a comprehensive speculative or encyclopedic knowledge (*scire omnia / omne scibile*)?

**6.** The term *curiositas* is not only connected to the allegation of crossing boundaries but also to a critical “boundary consciousness” of theoretical curiosity. How does the awareness of one’s own finitude shape the critical discourse on *curiositas*? When and how is this awareness articulated? Which role do religious or theological contexts play?

**7.** Attention should also be paid to the defective forms of *curiositas*, precisely to the vice of curiosity and correlating vices. Where and how is this critique of theoretical curiosity applied? Which influence does it have in academic or social contexts? Does the embeddedness of *curiositas* in the theory of virtue to some extent show traces of an ethics of knowledge?

**8.** The aesthetics of theoretical curiosity is as ambivalent as the attitude towards it. Opposed to *aisthesis*, as the prototype of the desire for knowledge, there is the *concupiscentia oculorum* as an expression of the *vana curiositas*. How is this discrepancy articulated aesthetically? Is there a specific iconography of *curiositas*?

**9.** Which literary figures and genres represent theoretical curiosity or *curiositas* in its affirmative as well as negative range of meanings? Which literary subjects are adopted and further developed? In which way do literary conventions and dynamics reflect *curiositas* discourses?

**10.** Journeys and discoveries are exemplary for a curiosity which reaches far beyond the related practical benefit. Especially in this long millennium on which our focus lies, the increase of mobility amounts to an extensive intercultural exchange of knowledge, to a disclosure and translation of new areas of knowledge, to an encounter with new cultures — driven by *curiositas*, the unbridled curiosity to break new ground. How is this mobility reflected and documented? In which way does its social and cultural influence show?

This list of questions cannot and is not supposed to be more than a first stimulus, and it is not intended to be exhaustive. It is much more intended as an invitation to further think about *curiositas*. We hope that the topic provides this food for thought. As always, the *Kölner Mediaevistentagung* aims at covering a wide spectrum of inter-

disciplinary research fields. Thus, we would like to invite philosophers, theologians, historians and philologists, literary scholars and cultural scientists, art and science historians, and many more to participate in the 42<sup>nd</sup> *Kölner Mediaevistentagung* with a question from their research field or an interdisciplinary issue. It is our goal to discuss and reconsider common patterns and to thereby open new perspectives.

Let me conclude by kindly asking for your topic proposals together with a short abstract (of about 1 page), preferably to be submitted by July 31, 2019 (thomas-institut@uni-koeln.de). I would be delighted to welcome you personally at the 42<sup>nd</sup> *Kölner Mediaevistentagung* next year. Please feel free to forward this invitation to colleagues who are not yet listed in our address file or send us the address of those who might be interested in the topic. Thank you very much!

I am looking forward to receiving your proposals and remain with kind regards

Cologne, March 2017



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