The Vices of Learning

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I Why scholarly vices?
What constituted scholarly vices in the late Baroque and early Enlightenment periods?

- Favourite theme of academic dissertations, polemical tracts and satires written in Germany ca. 1670–1730
- Especially at Protestant universities (Leipzig, Jena, Königsberg), also in Scandinavia
- Several hundred academic works on the vices of the learned
- “... perhaps academic satire made its final flourish in the late Baroque and early Enlightenment” (William Clark)
Are intellectuals moral heroes?

• Steven Shapin: Are intellectuals superior to ordinary men?
• Do they possess qualities that reflect self-denial, an ascetic lifestyle, religiosity and disregard for public favour?
• Scholarly immorality was disapproved of, both by Pietists and by enlightened rationalists
• In the humanist tradition excellence of mind was expected to be accompanied by excellence of morals
• Knowledge was built on individual virtues, and certain intellectual virtues were thought to be conducive to knowing
Useful book learning?

- Emerging processes of secularization, rationalization and diversification of knowledge
- Intellectual and educational shift from humanistic and theological ideals of learning and their traditional authorities to more experimental and scientific activities
- Scientific associations, literary salons and scientific journals were founded
- Usefulness was one of the key sensibilities that informed ideas about the value of knowledge
- Practical usefulness placed schoolmen in conflict with the bourgeois class, artisans and tradesmen
Studiosus in loco secreto
Scholarly vices

• i) pride and self-love:
  – Religious authors: self-love included the dismissal of tradition and the search for novelty (*captatio novitatum*) and a stubborn refusal to change wrong-headed opinions (*pertinacia*)
  – omniscient and self-taught characters
  – related to closed- or narrow-mindedness, excessive autonomy, arrogance and vanity
• ii) the desire for fame
• iii) logomachy, or a war about words
• iv) curiosity
II Critics
• Daniello Bartoli (1608-1685), *Character hominis literati* (1645, 1674):
  - happy wisdom, unhappy ignorance, academic theft, calumny, ambition, avarice and obscurity
Protestant sources

• **Ahasver Fritsch** (1629–1701): a treatise on the vices and errors of scholars, *Scholaris peccans or Tractatus de vitiis et erroribus scholarium* (1679).

• **Theophilus (Gottlieb) Spitzel** (1639–1691): comprehensive volumes on the happy and the unhappy scholar. He focussed on nine scholarly sins: atheism, pride, desire for fame, envy, disagreement, calumny, ambition, avarice and unhealthy curiosity.
Spitzel’s lists

INFELICUM. 1119


(III.) INFELICES EX FASTU ET SUPERBIA.

Hieronymus Hirnhaim: 
*De typho generis humani* (1676)

- Secular science = the Sphinx of Thebes, which posed unsolvable riddles to passers-by. The Sphinx beguiled men with her alluring female figure, but once she caught their attention, she lashed them with her dragon’s tail and tore them to pieces with her lion’s claws. She was sitting on a high cliff; this love of high places, together with her wings, indicated pride and presumption.

- written as consolation for idiots and a warning to the learned (*idiotis in solatium, doctis in cautelam*)

- lack of self-knowledge, pride, self-love, quarrelesome character and curiosity
Anagrams of scientia

- scientia iis necat
- scientia it e canis
- scientia it nescia
- scientia iste cain
- sit nicea, scientia
- sic ineat (animum) scientia
- sci entia
- scientia = iacentis
Scholars are like...

• ovens and chimneys, which were the heart of a house, but also the darkest and most sordid corners within the walls of a home
• a mountaintop is close to the sky and the rain falls directly on it before the water flows down to the valley, yet the summit itself remains sterile and infertile
• wooden signposts: their arrows indicated the direction to be followed, but the signs themselves did not move
• church bells, which called people together to worship, but were not part of the holy service
• wind, smoke, somnambulists
III Vice in focus: Curiosity
Augustine on the vice of curiosity

• “There is also a certain vain and curious longing in the soul, rooted in the same bodily senses, which is cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning; not having pleasure in the flesh, but striving for new experiences through the flesh. This longing--since its origin is our appetite for learning, and since the sight is the chief of our senses in the acquisition of knowledge--is called in the divine language “the lust of the eyes.” . . . For pleasure pursues objects that are beautiful, melodious, fragrant, savory, soft. But curiosity, seeking new experiences, will even seek out the contrary of these, not with the purpose of experiencing the discomfort that often accompanies them, but out of a passion for experimenting and knowledge.” (Conf. 10.35, Outler)
“This malady of curiosity is the reason for all those strange sights exhibited in the theater. It is also the reason why we proceed to search out the secret powers of nature—those which have nothing to do with our destiny—which do not profit us to know about, and concerning which men desire to know only for the sake of knowing. And it is with this same motive of perverted curiosity for knowledge that we consult the magical arts. Even in religion itself, this prompting drives us to make trial of God when signs and wonders are eagerly asked of him—not desired for any saving end, but only to make trial of him.” (Conf. 10.35, Outler)
Good and bad curiosity

• Good curiosity constituted an innate and healthy desire for knowledge, which helped men learn new skills
• Bad curiosity was a passion and a reprehensible vice of excess, which urged men to transgress certain boundaries of proper knowledge
  • an inordinate appetite for possessing knowledge that was either useless to or unattainable by humans
Urban Dietrich von Lüdecke, *Dissertatio juridica de curiositate* (1677)

- Harmful curiosity
  - i) was concerned with questions that God did not reveal to men
  - ii) focussed on something that did not concern human life
  - iii) diligently studied unnecessary topics
  - iv) focussed on difficulties and thereby neglected the principal issues
  - v) was not content to accept God’s will, but asked for his reasons
Positive curiosity

• Curiosity was positively assessed if it were pursued for good purposes. The desire for knowledge was the basic instinct inspiring different manifestations of curiosity, which could then take different and also condemnable routes.
• Although the appetite for knowing still had obvious affinities with the notion of original sin, the positive outcomes were found to outweigh the negative if the curious person had good intentions and if he did not merely aim to promote his own standing by studies to satisfy his curiosity.
All fields had their own ways of performing curiosity

- Ambitious theologians aimed to surpass the common crowd by creating new religious theories
- Polemics and historical theology satisfied their interests more immediately than other subfields by granting them visibility
- Ambitious humanists collected and found fault with grammatical mistakes in order to elevate themselves
- Ambitious historians were curious about memories, old secrets, fragments of information and other frivolities
- Curious philosophers focused on subtleties
- Natural scientists took up such impossible questions as the creation of the universe
Six typical unworthy objects of investigation:
– how to square a circle
– how to multiply a cube
– how to construct a perpetuum mobile
– how to find a philosophical stone
– divine astrology
– magic

The curious fields of history, music and astrology
Astrology

- Can heavenly bodies have any influence on earthly bodies? Can the stars determine human actions?
- Divination was considered a sin of hubris if a man believed he possessed the divine skill of seeing into the future.
- Astrologers were accused to be deceivers who read natural signs in the wrong way.
- A desire to know the future signalled an impious lack of trust in divine providence.
Operative curiosity (Lüdecke et al.)

- the active uses of curious knowledge
- not merely an internal desire for knowledge, but also a desire to operate in a certain way
- a new and more general understanding of curiosity, distancing itself from moralising, and emphasising instead practical and social outcomes
- functional expertise rather than learned expertise
- curiosity should be used for the common or private good
- neither virtue nor vice; rather the evaluation depended on the object of inquiry and the intentions, methods and goals of the person doing the inquiring
Friedrich Wilhelm Pestel, 
*Diss. de curiositate circa veritatis scrutinium* (1740)

- The three prerequisites for curiosity were:
  - the object of study
  - an extraordinarily strong attention to the object
  - a fervid desire arising from this attention to know the object thoroughly

- An innate desire for knowledge arose with a vivid representation of an object, which titillated the mind and set the animal spirits into vehement motion.

- Affects (*Affektenlehre*) urged men to seek good objects (cognition) and avoid bad ones (ignorance)
Conclusions

- Religious critics in particular emphasised the value of self-knowledge, and in their view curiosity was detrimental to this central goal, since it directed men’s attention away from self-examination and true knowledge.

- Peter Harrison: “the rehabilitation of curiosity was a crucial element in the objectification of scientific knowledge and led to a gradual shift of focus away from the moral qualities of investigators”

- The history of curiosity: a development from vice to virtue?
Selected bibliography