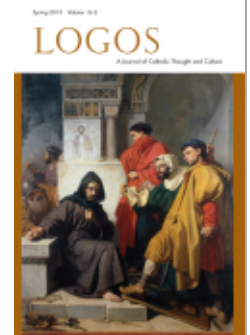# Curiosity and the Integrated Self: A Postmodern Vice

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Curiosity and the Integrated Self: A Postmodern Vice

The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.   PASCAL, PENSÉES, 136

It is a curious—I should say "strange"—thing to criticize the very character trait—curiosity—that may lead some to read this essay. "I wonder how curiosity could be a vice." " I don't know how vices could be postmodern." "Don't we think curiosity in students a good thing?" I shall suggest otherwise. I shall argue that curiosity is an especially luring vice, given our current historical context, and a vice that threatens the possibility of our flourishing as humans and as Christians. To make that case, a good deal of groundwork is required.

We might imagine the following situation (apologies to Jean Paul Sartre). A student comes to see a professor for advice. She sees but two options before her. "Following graduation, should I return home to South Carolina to live where I can care for my dying mother and my physically challenged brother? Or should I accept this fellowship to do graduate work at the University of Virginia?"

For Sartre, of course, this situation exemplifies the forlorn character of human existence. No "right" answer can be offered the student; this is a matter of radical choice. There is no authority to consult, there are no sources of moral truth to which our student may appeal. There is but a solitary individual who must, freely, create herself through her decision, whatever that decision may be. She can never know that her decision was the right one; she can know, however, that she acted freely. "Choose!" Sartre advises. "Choose with the knowledge that your choice was free. To act otherwise is bad faith."

For most of us Sartre's advice is troublingly feeble. Without locating the student's decision in a narrative that began long before and will end, God willing, long after this decision, the advice merely "Choose!" is closer to cruelty than to wisdom. Choose? How? According to what? Is there nothing but free, unguided choice? If that is the case, in what respects is choice better than chance? Indeed, hell is not other people but to be cast with the obligation to create oneself anew, every moment.

Contra Sartre, shouldn't we ask the student to tell us her story of her life? From where has she come and to where has she dreamed of going? Who are the main characters with whom she has interacted and who have formed her identity? And how does she, now, at this time, understand who she is and what is good for her life? To decide what she should do she must, first, determine which possibility is "of a piece" with who she is, for that is what the kind of creatures we are want for our lives—decisions that fit who we are.

This is but to acknowledge what Alasdair MacIntyre and others have recently reminded us of—that we are storytelling animals and that our identities are grounded in the unity of character required by a coherent narrative. To be a moral self is to have a coherent story that can be told about oneself. To recognize my life as a life, rather than as an organization of lived events and happenings, is to know the narrative in which these events are connected in some meaningful

way. For Sartre there is no narrative—the story of an individual is but a collection of discrete actions freely chosen by the individual and actions performed in bad faith. Such is our contemporary lot in life. If one can view one's life consistently in this way—and I do not believe that one can—one cannot view one's life as good.

From Sartre to the Saturated Self

Why broach the challenge of postmodernity with this criticism of existentialism? I want to suggest that despite significant differences, some defects of the postmodern self are similar to those of the existential self, that postmodern selfhood, like existentialist self-hood, precludes the narrative unity of character required for moral flourishing. This is, I take it, the moral challenge of postmodernity: How can persons of integrity—whole and integrated selves—be formed in our postmodern context? Can we, in the current post-modern social context, form *integrated* persons, persons with a unity of character, persons about whom a coherent narrative can be constructed?

Let me be more explicit here. I take *integrity* to be a condition of persons in which an individual's actions and emotions cohere with her idea of herself. To have the virtue of integrity is to have the disposition to choose those actions that cohere with one's self-understanding and, insofar as one is able, to mold one's emotions such that, like one's actions, they cohere with one's self-conception. In order to have integrity, thus, one must first have an identity, a sense of self with which actions may or may not fit. As Charles Taylor has written,

> To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.[1]

To be a moral self is, as is captured well in Daniel Dennett's phrase, to have a center of narrative gravity.[2.] To be a moral self is to have a set of constants—motivations, desires, beliefs, understandings, and projects that cohere and are present throughout an extended period of time.[3] These constants set the initial stage in practical deliberation, removing from consideration those options, those actions or emotions within one's control, which are "unthinkable" given a person's sense of herself.

A person of integrity performs only those actions that are expressive of or compatible with where she stands, with her understanding of herself, with the constants of her "practical orientation."[4] "I couldn't cheat on my taxes," she says, not because she doesn't know how to cheat or couldn't figure out how to cheat, but because she can't make the act of cheating fit the story she tells of herself, her center of narrative gravity. To be a person of integrity is to be an integrated person, a person with a unity of character, not blown about by every ill wind, but with a rudder that guides true even in troubled waters. Can there be any such self in a postmodern context?

Why ever not? Perhaps an anecdote will be helpful. Swarthmore psychologist Kenneth Gergen tells of a friend's experience shopping with her daughter. His friend sees a very attractive black dress with silver sequins and a daring cut. She is excited about the dress until she tries it on and then determines that she can't buy it; *it just isn't her*. Her daughter's response is "But Mom, that isn't the point. With that dress you would really *be* somebody." Gergen notes a profound difference in sensibilities between the modernist mother who has identified a self with whom the dress in question just doesn't fit, and her postmodern daughter for whom the dress offers an opportunity for her mother to re-create her identity.[5]

It might be especially appealing for us to think the daughter's the wiser part here. After all, we think of college life as a time of new beginnings, of being able to start afresh and become somebody new, somebody different, from who we were in high school. The daugh-

ter's voice is the voice of youth— "If you want, Mom, that dress can be you." If you want, you can be cool, you don't have to be that geek you were in high school. You can change, turn a new leaf, start all over again. Indeed, we might think immensely dull a life that offered no possibility of significant changes in our identity.

And if we are religious folk we might, too, wonder whether moral conversion doesn't put the lie to the good of integrity as I have explained it. After all, pimps, politicians, and others of dubious moral character can have the sort of integrity of which I speak. All that is required is a sort of consistency, a coherence of life with self-conception. A robber thus, who understands herself to be a robber, will have integrity insofar as her actions and emotions are of a piece with being a robber (although, of course, one is never merely a robber the way one may be merely an ingrate). There is integrity there—a coherence of one's actions with one's self-understanding, even though we may want to say that the integrated self is, in this case, a moral slimeball. Shouldn't we argue that the conversion of such moral slime is a genuinely good thing? And if so, how can both conversion—which represents a turning away from a coherent life-pattern—and integrity be goods?

The answer lies, I think, in what a converted person will typically say about himself as he looks back at his past. "That wasn't really me. I may have lived consistently, but that was a different person. Now, before God, I am the real me." In short, conversion is intelligible to us as a good only insofar as we can identify the "new" self of the convert as, somehow, the more authentic self of the individual or only insofar as we can identify the new self as coherent with the goods valued by the preconversion self. Conversion is good not because it is a turning away from a coherent self-understanding to a new destination, but because it is a turning away from a misguided path to the path one sees, in retrospect, as his true path or as a destination towards which the individual was, albeit unknowingly, headed.

Integrity, then, is a formal, rather than a substantive virtue. It is a minimal, but only a minimal, condition for moral goodness. It is, as well, a minimal condition for a morally evil character. That is to say, if your actions cohere with your self-understanding in which harming others is valued, you are, to be sure, a wicked person. One can be neither genuinely good nor genuinely wicked without integrity, though the absence of the virtue will not prevent one from performing genuinely good or genuinely evil actions.

To return from this digression, Gergen's point, and mine, is that the postmodern sensibility about choosing is radically different from the sensibilities that have preceded it. The premodern sensibility is that the choices we make are constrained by the social roles assigned to us by nature, nurture, and/or God. The modern sensibility is that the choices we make are constrained by our previous choices, by who we have become. The postmodern sensibility, by contrast, is that our choices are part of a package of unconstrained becomings. We are not one, but many selves. We see our identities as nothing but the roles we put on and take off at will. The premodern sensibility is that the sexy black dress is not appropriate for a college student's mother's station in life. The modern sensibility is that a dress that displays too much leg or too much cleavage may not fit who your mother is—she is, after all, your mother. The postmodern sensibility is that your mother can now, if she chooses, be a middle-aged woman not afraid to look daring or dashing, to parade either naked or as modest as a great-grandmother if she so wishes.

For Gergen, what distinguishes postmodernity is the "postmodern erasure of the self." There is no "I" with whom potential beliefs, attitudes, or actions must fit. The postmodern "I" is in a continuous state of emergence and adaptation, a "protean" self, as Robert Jay Lifton has described it.[6] I, as a postmodern self, am a collection of the roles I have played, the masks I have put on and taken off as I have wandered around and through the various opportunities that have presented themselves to me. To reject a dress or a role or a belief

because it doesn't cohere with my "self" is the postmodern analog of existentialist bad faith; it is to assume that there is an existing authentic "self" that can be known and that should inform my undertakings. But there exists no such self; there is agency, but there is no center of identity, no unity of character, no center of narrative gravity. Thus, what premodern and modern selves take to be inconsistencies and incoherencies of character, conduct, and belief, the postmodern self takes to be adaptations, alterations, and additions to the bricolage we each are.

Gergen has a story to tell of how this postmodern self has come to be, a convincing story, I believe. In brief, the postmodern erasure of the self is the result, above all, of the developing technologies of the century. In identifying the exponential growth in this century of the "technologies of human relatedness," technologies that have enabled us to establish and maintain interaction with more people over a longer period of time, Gergen reminds us of the following:

- A century ago there were fewer than 100 automobiles in the United States. By the 1990s there were more than 123 million cars in use, with more than six million new cars produced annually.
- At the turn of the century, there was no radio; at the present time 99 percent of the households in the United States have at least one radio, and more than 28 million new radios are sold each year.
- Air transportation was virtually unknown until the 1920s; there are now more than 42 million passengers a year in the United States alone.
- Television was virtually unknown until the 1940s; at the present time more than 99 percent of American households have at least one TV set—a percentage that exceeds that of households with indoor plumbing.
- Personal computers were virtually unknown until the 1970s; there are now more than 80 million in use.[7]

These technologies have formed the postmodern self, the "saturated self." Gergen writes:

> Emerging technologies saturate us with the voices of humankind—both harmonious and alien. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become a part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything we "know to be true" about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an "authentic self" with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all.[8]

Elsewhere, Gergen adds: "With the profusion of technologies specifically designed to increase the presence of others, we obliterate the conditions necessary for sustaining belief in the obdurate interior."[9]

Like Pascal, I want to argue that some sort of solitude, some time and space where the voices of others are silenced, is necessary for the development of the obdurate interior, is essential for the formation of individual identity. Furthermore, I believe that the "technologies of relatedness" and the attractions they hold for us powerfully infringe upon our solitude. The result is a fragmented and incoherent identity. An integrated identity is not easily achieved amidst the rattle and hum of the technologies of relatedness. We find it hard to resist the temptations of sight and sound; the greater the ease of access, and the more spectacular the sight or sound, the more powerful is the temptation to us. The result is fatigue, moral and spiritual, and the loss of a substantive self. So, film critic David Denby writes in *Great Books*:

. . . by the early nineties I was beginning to be sick at heart, sick not of movies or movie criticism but of living my life inside what the French philosopher Guy DeBord has called "the society of the spectacle"—that immense system of representations and simulacra, the thick atmosphere of information and imagery and attitudes that forms the mental conditions and habits of almost any adult living in a media society in the late twentieth century. A member of the media, I was also tired of the media: I was more than uneasy in that vale of shadows, that frenetic but gloomy half-life filled with names, places, chatter, acts, cars racing, gunshots, experts talking, daytime couples accusing one another of infidelity, the sheer busyness of it all, the constant movement, the incredible activity and utter boredom, the low hum of *needs being satisfied*.[10]

Readers, no doubt, can provide their own supporting tales from their experiences on the Internet, stories of experiences in which one senses his or her own identity receding from view, stories of the busy disappearance of the "obdurate interior," stories of the stimulation of the new and different right at our fingertips distracting us from the project of self-development. Such are the effects of social saturation. The self becomes a pastiche, populated with the values and views of others about whom we know little or nothing. The postmodern self is saturated with the voices—but only the voices—of a ghostly host, with the opinions and values of others, but not constant others. All this is the result of the steady barrage of information. This self, saturated with images and information easily accessed and stimulating, eclipses a more substantive self. Having registered the values and views of a multitude of diverse people to whom we have related, we are less certain of our own views. We who once were each one self are now each many selves.

Saturated Selves, Knowledge, and Character

At first glance this apparent loss of self should strike us as alarming. What hope is there for practices and institutions we think essential for human flourishing if there are no real selves to sustain them? Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Who, indeed! What could it mean to be a faithful spouse when the role of spouse is one I may put on and take off with ease in a connected world in which no one may know me? In the absence of substantive selves to sustain practices and the institutions in which these practices occur, will the practices long survive? Information can be conveyed, the intellect stimulated, for example, but can education take place with such insubstantial teachers and students?

Neither Kenneth Gergen nor Robert Jay Lifton is apocalyptic about the postmodern self; neither sees a dilemma in which we must either embrace the implicit nihilism of the protean self or abandon the technologies of relatedness and find our salvation in a neo-Rousseauian return to primitivism. Nor do I believe that these are our only options, though my assessment differs significantly from that of Gergen and Lifton. Precisely because there can be no flourishing for individuals or communities without a robust sense of identity, we must preserve, protect, or, if need be, recover for ourselves, a thicker, more robust sense of personal identity. The key to preserving our "selves" in the postmodern context, to protecting an understanding of ourselves as selves (without which a good life is not possible) lies in our learning how to manage and control the information that now saturates our lives, and to form traits of character that enable us to resist the lure of ever-present spectacles. If a major threat to the formation of a thick sense of personal identity is the cacophony of voices to which we postmoderns attend, then our salvation may lie in learning to manage that noise. Our flourishing may depend upon a retreat to the quietness of our rooms.

Curiosity and the Spectacles of Postmodernity

John Dewey signals this danger of ever-beckoning connectedness in his discussion of literacy in his 1939 essay, "Culture and Human Nature":

> One effect of literacy under existing conditions has been to create in a large number of persons an appetite for momentary "thrills" caused by impacts that stimulate nerve endings but whose connections with cerebral functions are broken. Then stimulation and excitation are not so ordered that intelligence is produced. At the same time the habit of using judgment is weakened by the habit of depending on external stimuli. Upon the whole it is probably a tribute to the powers of endurance of human nature that the consequences are not more serious than they are.[11]

Dewey continues:

> Before we engage in too much pity for the inhabitants of our rural regions before the days of the invention of modern devices for circulation of information, we should recall that they knew more about the things that affected their own lives than the city dweller of today is likely to know about the causes of his affairs. They did not possess nearly as many separate items of information, but they were compelled to know, in the sense of *understanding*, the conditions that bore upon the conduct of their own affairs.[12]

Dewey is surely correct in affirming that to possess information is not to understand and that understanding, rather than the mere possession of information, should be the goal of an education. The danger is that given the largesse and the lure of the technologies of relatedness we settle for information, for acquaintance with many diverse bits of reality, in lieu of understanding. The mind operates, collecting data, but the appropriate type of judgment, of sorting, sift-

ing, and integrating, fails to occur because of habits of dependence upon external stimuli. Consuming vast quantities of a very thin beer of information, we grow drunk, and the hangover prevents the appropriate handling of the information at our disposal.

This is a danger not only because the absence of understanding prevents us from connecting with the real world as we should, no matter how many bits of information we may have about the real world, but also because absent understanding there can be no coherent narrative of the self. In other words, this lack of "understanding" is both an intellectual defect and a moral defect. Insofar as the information I collect is but fragmentary and superficial, and insofar as I cannot organize and fit together the information about reality at my disposal, then I am not in touch with reality in the way I should be. Insofar as I do not understand and cannot integrate the beliefs I hold, the actions I perform, and the emotions I feel with respect to myself and others, that is to say, insofar as I am unable to understand my beliefs, actions, and emotions as "mine," I can construct no story of my life as progressing towards the Good or as a journey with God.

Both Gergen and Dewey point to an intellectual and moral defect exacerbated by contemporary information technologies. We do not mentally attend to the world in the appropriate way, in a way that is conducive to human flourishing. Instead, our appetite for invention, for new and different experiences and information, drives us to expose ourselves to more information and experience than we can properly process and interpret. The result is that the quality of the information we collect, as well as the quality of our interpretations of that information, declines. Thus, our perceptions of the world have the character of quick-takes and sound bites. Conflicts and contradictions elude us; we notice, but never truly see and because the appearance before us pleases, excites, or thrills us, we ask no question about the meaning of this thing before us but, instead, go in search of other experiences like it. Spectacle has become our substitute for substance. The vice of *curiosity,* of idle inquisitiveness, of

intemperance in the "desire for knowledge and experience," feeds and is fed by contemporary information technologies, driving us to ever-new perceptual stimulation.

Curiosity is an age-old vice, hardly the possession of post-modernity alone. St. Augustine troubled over this vice, identifying the extreme case of the vice of curiosity as our interest in the morbid in, for example, corpses. He writes, "What pleasure is to be found in looking at a mangled corpse, an experience which evokes revulsion? Yet wherever one is lying, people crowd around to be made sad and to turn pale."[13]

Augustine calls this immoderate desire to see or experience the "lust of the eyes," following the Johannine author (I John 2:16), and "the monster of curiosity." At its worst, Augustine claims, curiosity moves us to an unwholesome interest in events and entities, such as mangled corpses (though he does not characterize exactly what is inappropriate about this interest in mangled corpses). He does not think attention to mangled corpses is, as such, problematic. Physicians, undertakers, criminologists all may have a fitting interest in corpses. What is problematic is an interest in mangled corpses simply for the experience of seeing, simply because, for whatever reason, we take some satisfaction in seeing accident victims. This case of attention to the dead and dying is an extreme example, though common enough to us so that our traffic reports frequently mention "gawkers delay." Contemporary filmmakers, like Augustine and like Plato, recognize the Leontiusian erotic enticement of mangled corpses to some. Thus David Cronenberg's controversial 1996 film, *Crash*, in which the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh are inextricably linked in the erotic fulfillment found in automobile accidents by the James Spader and Holly Hunter characters.

Bernard of Clairvaux, as he discusses this first step of the "ladder of pride," enables us to see better what certain Christians think is at stake with curiosity. He writes:

> The curious person spends much time pasturing these [sinful, hence 'goatlike', eyes and ears] when he does not care to know in what condition he has left himself within. And truly, O man, if you concentrate hard on the state you are in it will be surprising if you have time for anything else. Hear what Solomon says, curious man. Hear, foolish man, what Wisdom says. "Guard your heart with all your might." (Prov. 4:23), so that all your senses may be alert to protect the source of life.[14]

Curiosity interferes with appropriate priorities. One should attend to one's communion with God, with other persons, and with creation. Curiosity, or idle inquisitiveness, uses the goods of the world not to turn out from the self to others, but to turn back in upon oneself, to have some pleasurable intellectual experience. Curiosity, in short, is in the first place problematic because it disposes us to attend to the superficial, only to the surface, due to the gratification we receive from the spectacle. Thus, we are distracted from attending to the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

This quest of curiosity for visual or aural or intellectual stimulation leaves us blind to reality, to God, our neighbors, and the created order, blind even to the source of the sought-after experience. No recent commentator has better captured this aspect of the postmodern vice of curiosity than Josef Pieper. He writes:

> There is a gratification in seeing that reverses the original meaning of vision and works disorder in man himself. The true meaning of seeing is perception of reality. But "concupiscence of the eyes" does not aim to perceive reality, but to enjoy "seeing. . . ." "What this seeing strives for is not to attain knowledge and become cognizant of the truth, but for possibilities of relinquishing oneself to the world," says Heidegger in his book *Being and Time*.[15]

What is problematic about curiosity, as Pieper and such predecessors as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Bernard of Clairvaux

argue, is that curiosity both distracts us from proper attention to that
to which we ought to be attending and disposes us to attend *in the
wrong sort of way* whenever we do turn to that to which we ought to
be attending. To repeat, the vice of curiosity both (a) interferes with
the proper objects of attention and (b) the proper means of atten-
tion. Curiosity typically distracts us from attention to the right
things. We look for the new sight, the next visual thrill. Mouse in
hand, we surf from Web site to Web site, on the prowl for something
a little faster, a little glitzier, than the last sight. And should we pause
and attend to the right things, curiosity disposes us to attend in the
wrong sort of way. Again, the curious person surfs the Web, thrilled
by the look or the sound of a page without considering whether look
or sound may interfere with the message of the page. Or, the curi-
ous person neglects the printed page for it does not thrill as the Web
search does.

Curiosity, then, is a mental habit, a disposition to attend to the
world in a particular way, that way consisting of a heightened sensi-
tivity to and awareness of information and cognitive experiences that
are mentally stimulating and thrilling. It is the habit of intellectual
thrill-seeking, a fixed disposition to abandon understanding for the
sake of the interesting, the novel, the superficially stimulating. Again
Pieper, this time on the dangers of curiosity:

> It reaches the extremes of its destructive and eradicating
> power when it builds itself a world according to its own image
> and likeness: when it surrounds itself with the restlessness of
> a perpetual moving picture of meaningless shows, and with the
> literally deafening noise of impressions and sensations breath-
> lessly rushing past the windows of the senses. . . . it is a world
> of, at most, ephemeral creations, which often within less than
> a quarter hour become stale and discarded, like a newspaper
> or magazine swiftly scanned or merely perused; a world which
> to the piercing eye of the healthy mind untouched by its con-
> tagion, appears like the amusement quarter of a big city in the

hard brightness of a winter morning: desperately bare, disconsolate, and ghostly.[16]

Although not a new vice, curiosity is an especially prevalent vice in the postmodern context, given the profusion of the technologies of relatedness. It has never been so easy to achieve visual and aural stimulation, especially at so little cost to one's cognitive powers. I can wake up and go to sleep to a CD or a radio. As I drive to work I can, again, listen to my radio or I can call my voice mail or my colleagues on my cellular phone. In my office, as my CD plays in the background, I can make contact with former colleagues by e-mail or I can surf the Web. I wear my SONY Walkman to class. In class I watch as my students restlessly sit in a visually plain classroom as a visually and aurally plain professor addresses them. Finally the class ends, I put my earphones back on and walk back to my office, turn on my CD player, and check my e-mail once again. I am connected, and yet profoundly inattentive to most of that to which I am most closely connected. That inattention, that habitual unreadiness to conscientiously attend, is a display of the vice of curiosity.

Curiosity and the Integrated Self

There are good reasons for Christians, though not only for Christians, to be concerned about this vice of curiosity. As those who profess a Creator God whose creation is for divine as well as creaturely purposes, the world possesses a bearing and significance that it would not have were it but a gift of chance. Proper attentiveness is called for both as an appropriate response to God as well as an appropriate response to the real nature and value of the creation. Curiosity is religiously vicious because it inhibits us from attending appropriately to God's creation and to God's ongoing activity in the world. Curiosity is an intellectual vice because it prevents us from attending to the world in a way of which the world is worthy and, thus, prevents us from genuinely getting in touch with the world.

There are good moral reasons, as well, to be concerned about the postmodern vice of curiosity. As I have suggested, in order to make sense of ourselves and to understand ourselves morally, we must be able to form a coherent narrative of our lives. To be a unified or integrated self is to be able to tell a story of how the events, the actions, the beliefs, and emotions of our lives are "of a piece." But postmodern curiosity works contrary to this goal of constructing a robust identity. It disposes us to attend only to the sights and sounds. We embrace the surface. We become surface ourselves. Thrilled by appearance, we take upon ourselves an ever-evolving, always changing set of new identities. Curiosity, thus, interrupts the solitude, the silence, the self-reflection necessary for integrity, for coherence, for wholeness. Curious selves, thus, will be either no selves or selves whose growth and development has been severely stunted.

By contrast, those with the corresponding virtue of *studiousness*, the disposition to a guided and reflective pursuit of knowledge, a prudent attention to God, to the world and to oneself, will be disposed to *see* the world. That seeing requires a discipline of looking, of studying what is there to be seen and heard. One focuses, ignores the temptation of distracting sights and sounds, in order to get in touch with what is present to him orher. With respect to the moral life, that seeing calls for an awareness of who one is and a sensitivity to the relation between one's self-understanding and one's beliefs, feelings, and actions. In short, studiousness is a necessary condition for self-integration.

Curiosity: Institutional Threats, Institutional Promise

I have argued that a primary challenge posed by postmodernity is the formation of robust selves, of individuals with substantive identities—projects, beliefs, emotions, and dispositions— of integrated selves. Postmodern theory, with its presentation of the self as contingent and ever-evolving, is but a reflection of the postmodern social context of the unending expansion of the technologies of

relatedness in an already saturated world. The prevalence of these technologies of relatedness and our ease of access to them tempts us, with our natural desire to experience, to be ever-hearing, ever-looking. The generations of postmodernity are, thus, *curious*. And this curiosity disposes us to collect sights and sounds, to attend just long enough for a jolt of mental stimulation before moving on to the next kick. The curious will lack integrity, will not be integrated selves, for the formation of a robust identity requires an attentiveness, a studiousness, which is the contrary of curiosity.

Let us bring the problem closer to home. One problem for postmoderns, I have argued, is the continuous drone of too many mouths, a quantity of voices that one cannot adequately engage in genuine conversation, never mind begin to understand. Ironically, this problem is more serious for students than for most in our society, for students are better connected, technologically speaking. Reflect, then, upon the plight of the typical first-year student at college. She has left her family and friends back in South Carolina to study at a Midwestern university. Not only has she lost family and friends, she has lost most of her privacy—she no longer has her own room, no longer has identifiable places of solitude and retreat, but is bombarded with new noises. There are some gains in autonomy—perhaps she has her own television and VCR and she can view what she wishes when she wishes, no Mom or Dad watching over her shoulder. And she can surf the Web as she wishes. In short, she probably possesses greater freedom but weaker moorings than she has experienced ever before; she is, for this reason, at some great risk in terms of her moral identity. She can become anyone; she can become a succession of anyones.

Faculty at many universities are aware of these threats to identity, are aware, at least some of the time, that the college years are years of great moral risk. Our solution to the threat to the development of moral identity is, however, typically something like this: We tell students to study and we think— "if they really do the work

they're assigned for our classes they won't have time to try out all the roles that tempt them. They'll have their autonomy but they'll be too busy to exercise it in troublesome ways." I think there is a good deal to be said for this faculty wisdom. Study is one of the two correctives to curiosity I will mention. But it must be genuine study, and I am not convinced that colleges and universities today are especially good places for developing the virtue of studiousness. On the contrary, frequently our curriculum is structured in such a way that we reinforce, rather than reduce, the lure of curiosity.

At my university, for example, students typically take fifteen to eighteen hours of coursework per semester—five or six courses in addition to extracurricular activities and part-time work. If we assume that these are courses are spread across the curriculum—physical science, social science, arts, humanities—we already have a lot of noise—academic noise, to be sure, but noise all the same— added to the student's life. Students know what professors often forget, that one takes on a different role, even as student, when one moves from one discipline to another. The skills and intellectual moves that earn you an A in your sociology class may not assist you much in religion class. Add to the number of courses a student takes the diversity of material a student engages in a typical course. I recently taught the history of ancient and medieval philosophy. We covered some pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. I threw in passing mention of the Epicureans and the Stoics. And my students, no doubt, were enrolled in several other survey courses. The result, I fear, was more noise, more confusion, and no more substantive a self resulting from the engagement with these thinkers. How could it be otherwise, especially given the drone of numerous courses, each pleading for attention, and the distant sounds of the connections of telephone, television, and computer? Study is close mental application to objects, to texts, persons, events. And the competition of one course with another and of curricular with extracurricular concerns leaves students and professors with little time for study.

Still, study, or something very like study, is not impossible for students. Breadth of learning is important if it is real breadth rather than the mere semblance of breadth. My hunch is that students will come closer to study and to real breadth of learning if, in fact, they are intentional in attempting to specialize each semester. Thus, a first step towards developing the virtue of studiousness might be for faculty advisers to encourage students to enroll in courses that have identical or overlapping methodologies and content. Have students attempt to work on as few distinct projects as possible, devoting themselves in each case to attentiveness, to thoroughness. Better yet, in consultation with a faculty member, students might select one book they will study, really study, during the semester. Let them surrender themselves to that book. Read it slowly. Read it without the stereo on in the background. Read it again and again. Surrender themselves to the text. Notice the author's words and cadences. Discover the author's mind. Achieve so intimate a familiarity with the author, on her own terms, that the student can speak for her. Then, and not until then, will students really be ready to speak *with* the author. Learning to take one text, or one author, or one artist, very seriously is a critical step in developing the disposition to proper attention, a first step in learning studiousness.

Study is not the only resource in the university setting available for the correction to our disposition to pursue the stimulation of ever-changing sight and sound. Those colleges and universities connected with the Christian tradition have resources within that tradition for returning to one's room, for practicing attentiveness. Dorothy C. Bass recommends that we retrieve the practice of Sabbath-keeping.[17] God made the Sabbath for us, she suggests, a day of rest from the noise of our daily lives, a day to attend to God, to our neighbors and ourselves, to our world. Keeping Sabbath, thus, may become a vital practice for training us to attend appropriately, an opportunity for forming identities as we engage our world.

To keep the Sabbath, then, is to retreat from the din of our daily lives. If I am professor or student it means to rest from the voices of the texts I am teaching and the papers students write, to have a day of self-consciously tuning out everyday voices so that I can listen better to God, to my neighbor, to my heart's and the world's longings. It means, perhaps, a day away from the glitter of stores so that I can see the gild of nature. It means the absence of idle conversation, though not the absence of playful connections with those I love. The Sabbath is given, Christians believe, as a foretaste of our rest when we will see God as he is and see everything in God. Let it be, thus, preparation and training for our daily seeing.

To love as God loves, that is the goal of Christians, but so to love requires a self and an attentiveness to God and the world difficult to come by in our noisy times. Curiosity trades upon our delight in the riches of creation and demands that we abandon careful attention to the world present to us for the sake of thrill around the corner. It is a subtle vice, its tentacles hard to notice. If curiosity kills cats, it but wounds us, though wounds us deeply, perhaps imperceptibly. But we can learn to love, can learn to study God and God's creation, can learn attentiveness. To that end, a return to our quiet rooms may be both the beginning and end of wisdom and delight.

Notes

1. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

2. Daniel Dennett, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives,* ed. F. Kessel, P. Cole, and D. Johnson (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1992).

3. Compare David Wong, "On Flourishing and Finding One's Identity in Community," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy,* Vol. XIII, *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue,* ed. Peter French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 330-31.

4. Ibid., 331.

5. Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 139.

6. Robert J. Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

7. Kenneth J. Gergen, "Technology and the Self: From the Essential to the Sublime," <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/kgergen1/text11.html> (1 September 2000).

8. Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 6-7.

9. Gergen, "Technology," 2.

10. David Denby, *Great Books* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 15.

11. John Dewey, "Culture and Human Nature" in *The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 216.

12. Ibid., 217.

13. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 211.

14. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 123-24.

15. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 200.

16. Ibid., 201.

17. Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999).