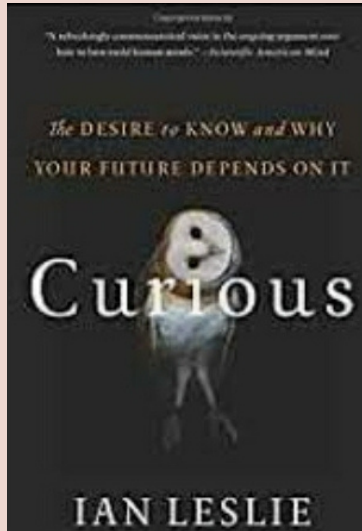


BOOK: CURIOUS: THE DESIRE TO KNOW AND WHY YOUR FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT

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Curious begins with an investigation to determine the fundamental difference between humanity and primates. Head researcher Su-Savage-Rumbaugh found in her study to teach the ape Matata language that, while her son Kanzi was able to teach himself language with greater success, he never asked the question 'why?' This distinction is what ultimately differentiated humans from the rest of the animal kingdom, and the book further delves into the various ways humanity has either promoted or oppressed curiosity throughout the ages

TV producer and director John Lloyd also found himself in a dilemma when he suddenly woke up and began asking the question 'Who am I?' What followed was a severe depressive episode for Lloyd, during which several of his films failed in quick succession and which resulted in the man finding a new passion in reading. His curiosity to uncover the meaning of life was roused and resulted in the successful production of the TV show QI-BBC.

During medieval times, curiosity was seen as problematic by the church and was consequently stigmatized and scorned. However the Renaissance and Reformation period in Europe saw the re-emergence of curiosity as a positive thing to be promoted. Commonly referred to as the Enlightenment, this period of time saw all acts of curiosity as things to be encouraged for the progression of society as a whole.

Professor Tyler Cowen spoke on the current struggle to rekindle curiosity in society today, particularly in societies where the population is taught to defer to authoritative figures, as well as with the advent of technology bringing answers to our fingertips, thereby decreasing one's drive to know more. Need for cognition(NFC), which is the scientific method of measuring intellectual curiosity was also mentioned. Low NFCs usually go with the opinion of the majority while high NFCs enjoy intellectually stimulating activities and get excited by the prospect of learning new things.

The terms diverse curiosity(i.e. The desire for novelty), epistemic curiosity(i.e.the desire to obtain new knowledge) and empathic curiosity (i.e. desire to know about other's thoughts and feelings) were also explored, along with a study which investigated cognitive reserve, that is, the brain's ability to resist old age. This study, executed by Robert Wilson, found that individuals who actively read and wrote throughout their life drastically decreased their rate of mental degradation as they had more neuronal pathways.

The pitfalls of curiosity were also explored in the story of Brian Smith, who's interest in guns led him to accidentally firing his father's gun in a busy street. Now a policeman, Smith cautions persons on childhood curiosity and states that unsupervised, curiosity can be a dangerous thing. Arguelles, an avid language learner and polyglot perfectly exemplifies epistemic curiosity.

Research has shown that the region of the brain responsible for learning is also responsible for feelings of romantic love. This region is known as the caudate nucleus and stimulates both feelings of pleasure as well as curiosity. An experiment to link parental involvement with the level of curiosity exhibited in babies showed that parents who actively encouraged questions in their children promoted their child's inquisitiveness, while those who were reluctant or unwilling to answer generally lessened the child's likelihood of asking more questions. It was also found that babbling in babies indicated the prime time to absorb information from their environment.

The Catholic Church all but outlawed curiosity during its medieval reign under Saint Augustine, however Thomas Aquinas changed that mandate and distinguished curiosity into two types: sinful and deviant and studious and serious. During this time, the works of Galileo, Da Vinci and Newton further decreased the Church's hold on the public. The sixteenth century was an era of great invention and saw the creation of the printing press, firearms and the compass. These tools would become instrumental in many great discoveries of foreign lands and many more important inventions that further pushed the masses into asking questions about the world in which they lived. Indeed, questions also helped play a part in the study which found a higher incidence of questions being asked by children in upper class homes compared to children from lower class homes.

The book rounds off with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's three misconceptions—that children don't need teachers to instruct them; facts kill creativity and schools should teach thinking skills instead of knowledge, and ends with seven ways to stay curious.

Overall, Curious was an informative and interesting read which explored the single distinguishing factor which made humans evolve beyond the rest of the animal kingdom in a truly riveting fashion.

"...a person's curiosity is more state than trait. That is, our curiosity is highly responsive to the situation or environment we're in. It follows that we can arrange our lives to stoke our curiosity or quash it"



References:

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