

A LITTLE BOOK OF THINKING

On Curiosity

*or, The Art of Escaping
One's Own Head*



Michael Hewitt-Gleeson

HEWI

THIS COPY BELONGS TO

For the pleasure of a better question.



AN ESSAY ON THE ENQUIRING MIND

On Curiosity

*or, The Art of Escaping
One's Own Head*



Michael Hewitt-Gleeson

Hewi

A literary adaptation
in the manner of Laurence Sterne

The inconvenient principle

“The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool.”

So said Richard Feynman—and a most inconvenient principle it is. For if I must distrust the fellow most constantly at my elbow, sleeping beneath my hat and answering whenever I say *I*, then where, pray, am I to find an honest adviser?

We have built data centres, Olympic institutes, universities, quantum computers and machines capable of composing a sonnet before breakfast. Yet we remain remarkably clumsy at one essential manoeuvre: escaping our own point of view.

The name of that manoeuvre is curiosity.



The intelligence trap

Do not mistake curiosity for a charming habit of children, professors and people who peer beneath restaurant tables. Proper curiosity is difficult work. It asks the mind to loosen its grip upon what it already knows—or thinks it knows—and to admit that reality may have entered by another door.

Here lies the Intelligence Trap.

The world admires intelligence: examinations passed, degrees framed, arguments won and clever persons installed in glass offices. But intelligence has an unfortunate second occupation. It is extraordinarily good at defending its owner's present opinion.

Give an intelligent person a mistaken view and he will not necessarily abandon it. He may fortify it. He will find precedents, summon evidence, cross-examine objections and deliver a closing speech of such elegance that the error itself begins to feel ennobled.

A sentence on an expedition

He becomes his own barrister—and the case is always
Me versus the Facts.

The cleverer we are, the better we may become at
remaining stuck.

Curiosity is the jailbreak.

The human brain, for all its splendour, is largely a
pattern-making and language-producing contraption.
We search for words, arrange them into sentences and
edit those sentences into stories. Then, because the
story sounds convincing, we call it thinking.

But languaging is not always thinking. A sentence may
travel in circles while dressed for an expedition.



At the unfamiliar door

Artificial intelligence has made this uncomfortable truth more visible. Machines now produce fluent language, identify patterns, analyse data and offer answers at astonishing speed. In this respect, human beings resemble large language models with legs—though we have added hormones, childhood memories and a tendency to take criticism personally.

Real thinking begins when the familiar sentence fails.

The brain notices something new. The hippocampus, our librarian of memory and context, whispers, “We have not shelved this before.” The anterior cingulate cortex detects a mismatch: “This does not fit.” The prefrontal cortex must then decide what to do.

Investigate? Ignore? Defend?

That small decision determines whether we learn or merely reload the old story.



The itch of not knowing

Novelty produces an itch. A player exceeds the limit we assigned him. A business strategy fails despite our confidence. The numbers refuse to support our beautiful theory. We experience cognitive dissonance—that disagreeable interval in which reality and belief occupy the same chair.

There are two ways to end the discomfort. We may dismiss the evidence: the referee was biased, the test defective, the market irrational. Or we may become curious: “What if my view is incomplete?”

The itch is the same. The future is not.

Curiosity is helped by dopamine, which rewards anticipation, discovery and learning. A small exploration succeeds; the brain marks it as interesting and encourages another. Curiosity therefore grows through use—but only where fear permits it.



Permission to wonder

Fear says, “Remain with what you know.”

Curiosity says, “Look beyond it.”

Both voices have served humanity. Fear protects us now; curiosity prepares us for later. But humiliation, punishment and ridicule give fear the larger chair. In teams where mistakes are mocked and uncertainty treated as weakness, people stop experimenting. They conceal doubt, repeat approved language and become experts in appearing certain.

A curious culture is built differently: one small question, one modest experiment and one honest “I don’t know—yet” at a time.

Curiosity is also contagious. Place one genuinely curious person in a meeting and watch what happens. If that person listens without preparing a counter-attack, treats contrary evidence as useful and says, “Let us find out,” others receive permission to do likewise.

A better view

Cynicism spreads just as quickly. One theatrical know-all can turn a room into a courtroom. Soon everyone is defending a position, and nobody is examining the situation.

Thus organisations divide into two kinds: those determined to prove themselves right, and those determined to become less wrong—faster.

For the brain coach, curiosity must be more than an admirable sentiment. It requires software.

One useful algorithm begins with the Current View of the Situation: the CVS. This is not the truth delivered upon a stone tablet. It is merely the view we have at present—a working hypothesis, temporary accommodation for the mind.

We then search deliberately for a Better View of the Situation: the BVS. Not a slightly polished CVS, but a view that may be ten times more useful, valuable or revealing.

The mind earns its supper

CVS to BVS.

Most people run the programme backwards. They drag every new fact towards the old conclusion until it fits—or breaks. Curiosity reverses the direction. It asks, “What if my present view is the least interesting thing here?”

A practical method for making this escape is the GBB: Good, Bad, Better.

Take an idea and list ten things that are good about it. Then list ten things that are bad. Finally—and this is where the mind is made to earn its supper—generate ten better possibilities: alternatives, experiments, improvements and options which lie beyond the original judgement.



The coming division

The exercise is simple, but simplicity is not weakness. Without a GBB, we may reject a valuable idea because we dislike it at first sight. We may embrace a dangerous proposal because it flatters us. We judge according to emotion and then employ intelligence to manufacture reasons.

With a GBB, judgement is postponed until thinking has occurred.

This ability matters more in the age of AI, not less. Machines are becoming excellent at analysis, pattern recognition, prediction, optimisation and fluent language. Mere cleverness is becoming abundant.

The greater human contribution will be frame-breaking: questioning the goal, redefining the problem and searching for possibilities not contained in the original box.



Take particular care

The coming division may therefore be not between the intelligent and the unintelligent, but between those who can escape their current view on demand and those who cannot.

Curiosity begins with three commitments. Treat your present view as a starting point, not a finish line. Build environments in which it is safe to admit uncertainty. Practise curiosity as a skill rather than praising it as a virtue.

Ask: What else might be true? What have I failed to notice? What better view could exist?

And when your mind replies, with great dignity, that it already knows—take particular care.

It is probably fooling you.



A SMALL EXERCISE TO KEEP

Good. Bad. Better.

*Choose an idea. Give your first opinion
a little time off.*

10

GOOD

What is valuable in this idea?

10

BAD

What are its faults and risks?

10

BETTER

What alternatives could be better?

ABOUT THIS LITTLE BOOK

On Curiosity

Adapted from the curiosity essay in *Brain Coaches' Handbook* by Dr Michael Hewitt-Gleeson (Hewi).

The literary voice pays homage to Laurence Sterne. This is a contemporary adaptation, not a work by Sterne.

Designed as a pocket keepsake, with Georgia type, generous margins and a wandering line: a small reminder that thought need not travel straight.

The source handbook grants permission to copy and share with team members, family and friends.



POCKET EDITION • 2026

*“What else
might be true?”*



CURIOSITY IS THE JAILBREAK.