INTELLECTUAL
VIRTUES FOR
EVERYDAY
LIFE

THE
EXCELLENT
MIND

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PART III: PUTTING ON VIRTUE

Preface

My thinking about the topic of this book began while I was looking for a job. The signatures on my doctoral diploma were barely dry, and there I was, writing purpose statements in application for professorships. As I started writing, I began thinking about what I wanted for my students. How did I want the educational process to pan out for them? What makes for a complete education? I knew that someday soon, a student would look toward the front of the classroom, lock eyes with me, and ask, "Why are we here? What is college *for*?" I wanted to have a good answer.

Writing those purpose statements led me to ask more general questions—questions relevant not just for my students, but for everyone. *What is it, really, to be educated? What are the qualities of a good thinker? What is it to have an excellent mind?*

Perhaps, I thought, a lot of knowledge is required. There are certain things an educated person should know. The basic elements of theories in the hard sciences. Some lines from Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky. Maybe some political thought and a bit of economics. And so on. But after a little reflection, I realized that knowledge was not enough. For starters, given human limitations, my students were sure to forget much of what they learned in my classes. Further, even if they retained much of their knowledge, this wouldn't ensure that they grasped how it fit together. They could know a lot, but fail to see the logical connections between their beliefs. This might leave them without a coherent view of the world. Still further, merely knowing a lot wouldn't necessarily keep my students from faulty reasoning.

So, in addition to knowledge, my students would need *skills* in logic and critical thinking. That addition made for a more complete educational package, at least to my mind. But eventually it became clear that even taken together, knowledge and skills were not enough. Knowledgeable, skilled thinkers can use their acumen to intimidate others, to mask poor arguments with slick rhetoric, or to seek the appearance of cleverness for its own sake. Moreover, thinkers who focus only on knowledge and skills might learn only what they must learn in order to "get by"—to pass a test, get a good grade, or receive a credential. As valuable as these things might be, I didn't want my classes to produce a bunch of academic mercenaries.

I wanted my students to care deeply about truth, knowledge, and understanding—and to care about these for more than just their practical benefits. I wanted students to become engaged in a life-long effort to get, keep, and share knowledge. And I wanted them to be the kinds of people who do these things consistently, as an expression of who they *are*. I became convinced that if my students were to be successfully educated, they would need to grow in traits like curiosity, intellectual carefulness, intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and open-mindedness.

These character traits are called *intellectual virtues*, and they are important for far more than education. They are central to our general flourishing, both individually and collectively. Once I began to think seriously about them, I came to see that the language of "intellectual virtue" gave me a kind of vocabulary that helped me to articulate goals, and to diagnose problems, in many areas of life. My supervisor was good at running meetings because she was both *open-minded* and *intellectually firm*. The rise in uncivil discourse between the political Right and Left was marked with arrogance—a failure of *intellectual humility*. Some people seemed to apply stricter standards to the views of those on the other side of the political aisle

than they did to their own views—a failure of *fair-mindedness*. You get the idea. And I'm sure you can think of your own examples.

Life is complicated. So the pursuit of things we care about—including personal success, loving relationships, and responsible citizenship—requires good thinking. Failures in these areas often result from failures to think with intellectual virtue. By contrast, virtuous thinking fosters purposeful living, attentive listening, and informed action. Thus, the intellectual virtues are far from merely academic.

I did not invent the term *intellectual virtues*. Intellectual character has been a prominent topic of scholarly discussion for over three decades. I am excited to invite readers into this conversation, and to introduce some of its key participants. While I hope that professional philosophers and other academics will learn something from this book, I have written it mainly for students and general readers. I have tried to make the book as accurate as possible without sacrificing readability, and as readable as possible without sacrificing accuracy. To encourage the study of the intellectual virtues beyond this book, I have provided suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter.

In my own thinking about intellectual character, I am indebted to Lorraine Code, James Montmarquet, Linda Zagzebski, Robert Roberts, Jay Wood, Jason Baehr, Heather Battaly, and Ron Ritchhart, among many others. These thinkers have pioneered a new approach to thinking about knowledge and education that gives virtues of intellectual character a fundamental role. They have produced a wealth of insightful work addressing the question I asked on behalf of my students all those years ago: *what is it to have an excellent mind*? The main goal of this book is to address this question by exploring the intellectual virtues—to consider what they are, why they matter, and how we can grow in them.

Initial Exercise

Take an inventory of your own vocabulary as far as good thinking is concerned. Take out a sheet of paper and, in your own words, answer the following questions. What is it to have an excellent mind? What traits must an excellent thinker possess? What are the traits of a really bad thinker? List as many traits as you can.

PART I

WHAT ARE INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

1

Why Good Thinking Matters

It's day three of my Western Thought course—Aristotle day. I greet the students as they settle in. They ready their notepads and silence their cell phones. I feign a sullen look. "I have some bad news," I announce. I wonder what they're thinking. Is there an impending pop quiz? Are they in for an awkward "ice-breaking" exercise? I snap the cap off the dry-erase marker and deliver the news: "You're all going to die." They sit silently, stunned and confused. I try to break the tension with a wry smile. There's giggling—some genuine and some manufactured. I walk over to the board. "Let's talk about what you want in your obituary."

The exercise is a bit clichéd, but the students are eager to participate. They start to volunteer how they'd like to be remembered: she was honest; he was humble; she loved her friends and family; he was kind to strangers; she was brave; he overcame obstacles; she was compassionate; and so on. I've conducted this exercise many times. Except jokingly, no one has ever listed wealth, fame, fashion sense, good looks, or good grades. Without fail, the discussion always reaches the same conclusion: in the end, character matters—a lot.[1]

I feel a twinge of guilt for forcing this activity on my students. I wouldn't blame them for resenting me. The exercise is a little grim. As a society, we pay doctors handsomely to keep illness and death away from us. We pay athletes and actors even more to help us forget about death altogether. And here I am, the philosopher, forcing my students to think about their own demise. Little wonder my paychecks pale in comparison to those of doctors, athletes, and actors.[2]

Why the painful exercise? Because the prospect of death helps us to see clearly what matters in life. The moment they're primed to focus on what really matters, my students start to grasp that having a good character is central to living a good life, a point Aristotle made over 2,000 years ago.

This is a book about character—*intellectual* character. We're all familiar with moral virtues—traits like justice, courage, and moderation. Virtues like these make up the character of the morally good person. They make the difference between someone who is morally excellent and someone who is morally mediocre. But here's a point that's easy to miss: each of us has not just a moral character, but also an intellectual character. When it comes to our thinking, we can be intellectually courageous or cowardly. We can be intellectually humble or arrogant. We can be curious or indifferent toward learning. We can be intellectually careful or careless. And so on.

Our focus from here on out will be the *intellectual* virtues. These are the character traits of excellent thinkers, where such thinking extends not just to our *getting* truth, knowledge, and understanding, but also to our *keeping* and *sharing* them. As important as moral virtues are, they won't occupy the center of our attention. Rather, our aim is to discover what it is to have an excellent mind—a mind that is curious, careful, self-reliant, humble, confident, honest, persevering, courageous, open, firm, fair, and charitable. In the chapters that follow, we'll consider what these virtues are like, why they are important, and how we might acquire them.

Here is a crucial point. Despite their label, intellectual virtues are not just for scholars, academics, or other highbrows. It's not as though the practically minded among us could sensibly decide to focus on moral virtues, and leave the intellectual ones to the bookworms. At least in practice, the intellectual virtues are hard to separate from the moral ones (but see chapter 2 for more on the distinction). Our intellectual character affects what we believe, and

what we believe affects how we act. As David Hume notes, "Many of those qualities, usually called intellectual virtues, such as prudence, penetration, discernment, [and] discretion, [have] a considerable influence on conduct."[3] It works like this. Our intellectual character guides how we think and what we believe. Our beliefs in turn guide our actions. So, indirectly, our intellectual character guides our actions. Because these actions are of crucial importance, our intellectual character is, too. At some level, everyone is—or should be—an intellectual. Intellectual virtues are for everyday life.

At least in a backhanded way, most of us acknowledge that these virtues are valuable. We turn on the news or surf the Net, and come across people speaking with arrogance or dogmatism. And we hate these vices—at least when we see them in others. This should impel us to seek the corresponding virtues—traits like intellectual humility and open-mindedness. Thus, the Roman poet Horace:

> First step in virtue is vice to flee;
> First step in wisdom is to be folly-free.[4]

So far, so good. But the point of seeking virtue isn't just to avoid vice. Rather, the pursuit of intellectual virtues is central to several things we care about. These virtues are for anyone who wants to seek and find success, to act lovingly, to enjoy better relationships, to be well educated, and—not least—to find good answers to important questions. Achieving all these things requires good thinking. And to think well consistently, we need good minds.

Intellectual Virtues in Everyday Life

To appreciate the practical importance of the intellectual virtues, it will help to consider the importance of good thinking in several different areas, including general "success" in life, relationships, citizenship, and education. Let's take these in turn.

Success

Every year, millions of us awake some morning in January and commit to doing better than we did last year. We promise ourselves that we'll work harder and smarter to, well, you fill in the blank.

Everyone wants to be a success in life. But what does that amount to? What is it to live a good life? And how do we go about living one?

These are hard questions. We need help to answer them. So maybe we log on to Amazon.com and click our way to the "Self-Help" section. We're overwhelmed with hundreds of titles to pick from, titles like

- *Anyone Can Be Cool, but Awesome Takes Practice*
- *Shut Up, Stop Whining, and Get a Life: A Kick-Butt Approach to a Better Life*
- *Divorcing a Real Witch*

In case you were wondering, yes, these titles are real. But how are we supposed to know which books will aid our success? Some of the books are surely helpful; others are stuffed with ancient platitudes dressed up as innovative lifehacks. One volume touts the importance of "getting in the zone." Another says we need to stick to a daily schedule. $23.99 for *that*? No sale. Another book talks about overcoming life's obstacles. It looks interesting, but the wealthy author on the cover doesn't look like he's had to overcome much. Even after an hour of browsing, it's hard to tell whether any of these books will be helpful. Defeated, we click over to social media.

Figuring out what it is to be successful, and discerning how to achieve success, are serious mental exercises. To protect ourselves against aimlessness and failure, we'll want to think well about these things. We'll need to figure out our goals. We'll need to consider which habits and strategies will help us achieve those goals and which will hinder. We'll need to plan the steps that are necessary for success, and then we'll need to execute them. This means that

we'll need to think *wisely* about what's worth wanting, and *carefully* about how to achieve it. Along the way, we'll encounter obstacles to achievement. To figure out how to solve our problems and overcome these obstacles, we'll need to think with *perseverance*. To be consistently, reliably, and purposefully (as opposed to luckily) successful, we must think well. And if we want to think well consistently, we should seek to develop intellectually virtuous character.

Loving Relationships

Recall my students' fake obituaries. These often feature the refrain that a good life involves having loved others well—especially one's family and friends. At least at first, it's tempting to think that such love is just an emotion, a kind of warm feeling toward those we love. But warm feelings don't count for much unless they result in loving actions—and loving actions often require careful thought. So, when we consider what it is to love others well, we can't avoid the topic of good thinking. Try placing yourself in the following scenes:

> *Scene 1*: You've been dating Bobby for a year now. You enjoy the relationship. But he's often unreliable, sometimes inconsiderate, and unable to hold down a steady job. Your parents like him, and they're rooting for him. However, they worry that if you marry him, he'll constantly disappoint you, sap your strength, and drain your financial resources. You think they are probably right. Despite this, you still love him. After a romantic dinner, he pops the question. How will you know what's best to say next?

> *Scene 2*: Your best friend Brittany is an alcoholic. She's destroying her once-promising life. It started with partying, which she enjoyed in excess during her college years. Now she's 32, and her drinking can no longer be chalked up to youthful exploration. Alcohol is leading Brittany to neglect her children

and to show up late for work. She seems depressed. She turns to the bottle for help, but its help is fleeting. You decide it's time to intervene. You know that Brittany trusts you. But she can be defensive and combative. How will you help her see the error of her ways?

Scene 3: Your father lies in the ICU after a terrible car accident. He is on life support, with massive brain injuries. The doctors can perform a surgery that stands a good chance of saving his life. However, there's a fifty-fifty chance that even if the surgery succeeds, your father will emerge a shadow of his former self. He may not be able to speak, walk, or even feed himself. He has told you that he would never want to live like this. Before you ask for life support to be unplugged, the doctor reminds you there's a chance that the surgery will enable your father to live normally. How will you decide what you should do?

Sadly, many of us will find ourselves in such situations at some point. What kinds of thinking habits do we want at our disposal when we arrive? (Please close the book for a moment to think about how you would answer this question for each of the three scenarios.)

Clearly enough, to make loving decisions in such cases, we'll want good thinking habits. To decide well about complicated matters while under duress, we'll need to be *careful* and *thorough*; loving decisions can't be made in careless haste.[5] Further, we'll need to be *humble* enough to know when our own cognitive resources aren't up to the task of making the decision—a good thinker knows when to seek advice from others. If we lack these virtues, we may not be able to make the decisions that are best for our loved ones. For we can no more "turn on" good thinking patterns that we haven't ingrained than a ballplayer can expect to hit home runs without taking batting practice. To make loving decisions in trying conditions requires good thinking.

And to think well consistently, we must practice virtuous habits of mind.

Note, though, that intellectual virtues are relevant to more than just momentous life decisions. They're crucial to acting lovingly in the midst of our daily routines. This is because loving action contains an intellectual component; and unloving actions often involve intellectual failures. To put myself on the hook for a moment, I might consider some questions. Earlier today, was I *attentive* to the fact that my wife had a migraine and needed an extra cup of coffee? Was I *careful* to remember which clothes go in the laundry machine and which are hand-wash only? Was I *fair* in responding to my younger daughter's reasons for wanting another scoop of ice cream? Did I *persevere* in seeking a creative idea for my older daughter's birthday invitations? Have I been *courageous* in addressing my friend's tendency to misrepresent the views of his political opponents? Have I been *humble* enough to admit that, when it comes to parenting, I am often just making things up as I go? I won't confess my own answers here—that could get embarrassing. But by asking yourself similar questions, you can start to see the importance of intellectual virtues in everyday life. Intentional, loving action requires good thinking; and consistently good thinking requires virtuous habits of thought.

Responsible Citizenship

The point about loving actions extends beyond our families and friends to society as a whole. We want (or *should* want) to be responsible citizens—and this requires good thinking. At the founding of the United States, Thomas Jefferson observed, "The basis of our government is the opinion of the people."[6] Our beliefs or opinions influence our voting behavior, along with the rest of our civic activity. To form such beliefs carelessly is to shirk a duty to our fellow citizens. W. K. Clifford puts the point like this:

> No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is
> ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like,
> confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others;
> and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts,
> which may someday explode into overt action, and leave its stamp
> upon our character forever. And no one man's belief is in any
> case a private matter which concerns him alone. . . . Our words,
> our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are
> common property.[7]

When Clifford says that our beliefs aren't private, and that
our modes of thought are "common property," he means that
these things have consequences for those around us. The social
consequences of our beliefs, Clifford says, create an obligation for
us to seek reasons for what we believe. We owe this to one an-
other. Intellectual carefulness is a requirement for responsible
citizenship.

Consider the number and magnitude of problems today's na-
tions must address. In the United States alone, there are many: ra-
cial injustice, a deadly pandemic, climate change, poverty,
terrorism, pollution, blue-collar crime, white-collar crime, the
nuclear threat (check the Doomsday Clock), dwindling Social
Security funds, religious bigotry, anti-religious bigotry, immigra-
tion debates, healthcare woes, declining education rankings, and
corrupt politicians—just to name a few. If we want to solve any of
these problems, we'll need to think well. We'll need thinking that is
careful, creative, and courageous. Further, as we seek to solve our
society's problems, our conversations will inevitably yield contro-
versy. To ensure that discussions of controversial topics produce
more insight than inflammation, we'll need our thinking to be
open-minded, fair, charitable, and—perhaps surprisingly—firm.
In short, we'll need our thinking to be *virtuous*. Such thinking is far
from a *merely* academic exercise—though it is central to academic
success, as we'll see next.[8]

Education

It's the first day of the fall semester. A gaggle of nervous teenagers shuffles in for the premiere of my first-year seminar. Today's question: *Why did you decide to attend college?* Most students begin by saying they're here because they want to become doctors or lawyers. A few admit that, really, they just want to earn a bunch of money. Most agree that they want to make lifelong friends. Many say they're here to get good grades. After a few moments of silence, a junior transfer student says she's here to gain knowledge about her chosen field because she finds it interesting—the most thoughtful response yet. But it soon becomes clear that knowledge can't be the whole story. We've all known people with a lot of knowledge who are arrogant or dogmatic. We signal their lack of virtue with the derisive label "know-it-all." Finally, a pair of thoughtful students come out with it: they're here because they want to become *better thinkers*. I curb my enthusiasm so the other students don't feel left out. The discussion is moving in the right direction.

Over the course of a career, most college grads will change jobs several times, and many will change fields altogether. A recent LinkedIn study reports that "job-hopping" has almost doubled in the past 20 years.[9] So, it can be shortsighted for students to attend college just to prepare for a single, specific job. And though in some fields (say, math and music) the requisite knowledge base is fairly stable, in other fields (business, technology, economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and the hard sciences) the needed stock of knowledge is constantly changing. Today's knowledge may be obsolete tomorrow; and we might forget it in the meantime. So, though knowledge is a vital part of an education, the purpose of attending college can't be just to gain it.

Skills—particularly transferrable skills like critical thinking and clear communication—are an important supplement. They, at least, can transfer across fields. But without a certain sort of character, graduates might apply their skills unwisely, or not at all. They might

use critical thinking skills just to look clever, or to disguise poor arguments with slippery phrasing. Indeed, they might be especially dangerous to society if they do this in ways that are both knowledgeable and skilled. For then they might know just which words will manipulate their hearers *and* have the skill to carry out the ruse. George Orwell remarks:

> In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. [Indefensible acts] can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. . . . Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties . . . —is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.[10]

None of this befits a proper education.

What graduates need, in addition to knowledge and skills, are the virtues that will help them put their knowledge and skills to good use—for their own good, for the good of others, and out of reverence for truth itself.

In his award-winning book, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, Columbia University professor Andrew Delbanco develops several arguments for attending college. His central argument focuses on the well-being of the college graduate. You should go to college, he says, because it will help you flourish as a person. In stating the argument's key premise, Delbanco recalls a remark from his colleague Judith Shapiro: "You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life."[11] To be such a place, a mind needs to take on certain characteristics. Delbanco identifies five:

1. A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.

2. The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena.
3. Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of science and the arts.
4. A willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own.
5. A sense of ethical responsibility.[12]

Though Delbanco doesn't use the language of intellectual virtue, such language helps to clarify what he wants for his students. Consider his list. Item (1) seems well characterized as a kind of intellectual caution, along with a humble willingness to learn from our forebears. Item (2) is a matter of intellectual attentiveness and creativity. Item (3) suggests curiosity and the love of knowledge. Item (4) highlights the importance of open-mindedness and fair-mindedness. Item (5) surely includes the kind of intellectual responsibility that informs good ethical decisions. We can summarize Delbanco's argument for college like this: you should go to college because it can help develop your character, particularly your intellectual character. Those who grow in this way ensure that they continue learning beyond their college years—something all professors hope for their students. (We should add: growth in intellectual virtue is decidedly *not* reserved for those who have had a formal higher education. Plenty of formally educated people squander the gift of college. Plenty of people who miss college exhibit intellectual virtue nonetheless. The point is that a complete education—whether formal or not—should help pupils develop the character of a lifelong learner, a character that includes the intellectual virtues.)[13]

Truth and Knowledge

"All humans by nature desire to know."[14] So says Aristotle. And *he* would know, having made millennia-lasting contributions

to several different fields, including logic, politics, ethics, and rhetoric. We have an innate desire for knowledge. As any parent knows, young children ask loads of questions. Adults have different questions, and may be reluctant to ask them in public. But the questions remain.

We have questions. We want answers. But not just any answer will do. We want our answers to be *true* (to describe things accurately). We want true answers based on *good reasons* instead of lucky guesses. And we want to understand *why* things are the way they are. We want *explanations*. At least some of the time, we want this kind of understanding not just for some practical purpose, but for its own sake. We naturally want—or *should* want—knowledge, not just because it helps us "get by," but because it's valuable in its own right.

When it comes to knowledge and understanding gained in the course of inquiry, the difference between ignorance and enlightenment often lies in intellectual virtue. This is because inquiry presents unexpected and daunting challenges—challenges that stretch us beyond our current knowledge and ability. We'll observe this point repeatedly in the chapters that follow. For now, consider the perseverance needed for Isaac Newton to invent the calculus central to his groundbreaking physics. (Students lament that calculus is hard to learn. Imagine *inventing* it!) Through a combination of genius and years of persistent inquiry, Newton gave us unprecedented insight into the natural world. His contemporary, Alexander Pope, put it like this:

> Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night.
> God said, "Let Newton be!" And all was light.[15]

Centuries later, Albert Einstein's theory of special relativity supplanted Newton's theory. Einstein reportedly saw perseverance as central to his success: "It's not that I'm so smart. I just stay at the problems longer."[16]

Of course, few of us can sensibly aspire to Newton-Einstein levels of achievement. These thinkers were geniuses, and they still had to out-work their peers in order to make their discoveries. But in a way, that's the point. If Newton and Einstein needed intellectual perseverance in their quest for knowledge, we should expect to need some, too.[17]

Intellectual Virtues Are for Everyone

In this chapter, we have considered why intellectual virtues are important. The pursuit of these traits isn't just for those who want a PhD, an MD, or some other set of letters behind their name. Intellectual virtues aren't just for academic professionals. They're for anyone who cares about flourishing relationships, respon-sible citizenship, quality education (whether formal or not), and the quest for knowledge. That is to say, intellectual virtues are for everyone. Now that we've established their importance, it's time to explore in greater detail what intellectual virtues *are*.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Try the "obituary exercise" the author discusses in this chapter. What, if anything, does this exercise reveal about what is important to you? Does the notion of character play a role in your answer?

2. How might being intellectually virtuous (fair-minded, humble, etc.) help your relationships? How might it help you be a more responsible citizen? See if you can support your answers with specific examples.

3. What do you think is needed for a good education? Do intellectual virtues play a role in your answer? If so, why so? If not, why not?

4. Do you value truth, knowledge, and understanding? If not, why not? If so, why do you value them?

Further Reading

A central source for thinking about the nature and importance of the virtues is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (many editions available). For an insightful, accessible introduction to the topic of moral character, see Christian B. Miller, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For detailed narratives exploring the role of character in the good life, see David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015). For a lively, sure-handed introduction to recent philosophical work on moral and intellectual virtues, see Heather Battaly's book *Virtue* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015). Linda Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) was massively influential in drawing philosophers' attention to the study of intellectual virtue. For a discussion of the mind's role in responsible citizenship, see W. K. Clifford's classic essay, "The Ethics of Belief" (many editions). Readers interested in the role of intellectual virtue in education will find excellent resources in Jason Baehr's comprehensive manual for intellectual virtues education, *Cultivating Good Minds* (available online at intellectualvirtues.org). See also *Intellectual Virtues and Education*, ed. Jason Baehr (New York: Routledge, 2016), and Ron Ritchhart, *Intellectual Character: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). In this chapter, I claim that intellectual virtues help us pursue truth, knowledge, and understanding. For a defense of the stronger claim that acts of intellectual virtue are required for knowledge, see Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind*.

Notes

1. In *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), David Brooks helpfully distinguishes between "résumé virtues" and "eulogy virtues." The traits we'll study in this book are in the latter group.
2. For more on the cultural values that give rise to the relative neglect of philosophy, see Thomas Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), chapter 3. I borrow the point about doctors, athletes, and actors, from Morris.
3. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 313.
4. Horace, *Epistles*, Epistle I (to Maecenas), in *The Complete Works of Horace*, ed. Casper J. Kraemer Jr. (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1963), 307.

5. I am indebted to Philip Dow here. Dow develops this point in *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2013), chapter 11.

6. Quoted in Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 28.

7. W. K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 73.

8. For a detailed discussion about the link between intellectual responsibility and moral responsibility, see James A. Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1993).

9. Guy Berger, "Will This Year's College Grads Job-Hop More Than Previous Grads?," LinkedIn official blog, April 12, 2016, retrieved from https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads.

10. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in Orwell, *George Orwell: A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 166–67, 171. I have omitted the specific political parties and the acts Orwell discusses here, in order to foster reflection by proponents of different political parties.

11. Delbanco, *College*, 33.

12. Delbanco, *College*, 3.

13. For a detailed defense of the claim that intellectual virtues are the key character traits of lifelong learners, see Jason Baehr, "Educating for Intellectual Virtues: From Theory to Practice," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47, no. 2 (2013), 248–62.

14. Aristotle, Metaphysics, Book I, line 1, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1552. I have ungendered this quotation to prevent unnecessary distraction.

15. This poem was intended as an epitaph for Newton, who is buried at Westminster Abbey. Further information is available at the Abbey's website: http://www.westminster-abbey.org/our-history/people/sir-isaac-newton .

16. This quotation is attributed to Einstein in dozens of publications. I have not been able to find the original source.

17. On Newton, see James Gleick, *Isaac Newton* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2004). On Einstein see Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

2

The Intellectual Virtues

A Closer Look

There are at least three ways to improve our grasp of the intellectual virtues. First, we can list them. Intellectual virtues include traits like curiosity, intellectual carefulness, intellectual autonomy, intellectual humility, self-confidence, intellectual honesty, intellectual perseverance, intellectual courage, open-mindedness, intellectual firmness, fair-mindedness, and intellectual charity. Second, we can develop an account of what these virtues are. We began that task in chapter 1, where we saw that intellectual virtues are the character traits of excellent thinkers. We'll continue unpacking that account in this chapter. Before we do, let's consider a third way of getting to know the virtues of the mind: let's see how they look "in action."

Intellectual humility is the virtue that enables us to consider, assess, and own our mental limitations.[1] Limitations might concern our intellectual character, our abilities, our circumstances, or our having believed something false. We might be biased, incapable, dogmatic, or ignorant—or simply wrong. Owning any of these shortcomings takes humility. Richard Dawkins recalls a prominent zoologist who taught at Oxford during Dawkins' undergraduate days:

> For years he had passionately believed, and taught, that the Golgi Apparatus (a microscopic feature of the interior of cells) was not real: an artefact, an illusion. Every Monday afternoon it was the custom for the whole department to listen to a research talk by a visiting lecturer. One Monday, the visitor was an American cell

biologist who presented completely convincing evidence that the Golgi apparatus was real. At the end of the lecture, the old man strode to the front of the hall, shook the American by the hand and said—with passion—"my dear fellow, I wish to thank you. I have been wrong these fifteen years." We clapped our hands red. . . . The memory of the incident I have described still brings a lump to my throat.[2]

When we reflect on the kind of humility needed to admit a mistake of this magnitude, in front of one's colleagues, with one's hard-won reputation on the line, we rightly find ourselves, well, *humbled.*

Here's another example. *Intellectual perseverance* is the virtue that disposes us to continue in our intellectual tasks in the face of obstacles. This trait is often needed to pursue new knowledge (recall the examples of Newton and Einstein). But sometimes, we must exercise perseverance in order to keep knowledge we already have, or to share it with others. In medieval Irish monasteries, the descendants of an illiterate people did just this.[3] After the fall of Rome in the 5th century, much of Western European culture lay in ruins. Those with the means for academic learning departed for safety in the East, where they would remain for centuries. In the West, there were the monks. Tucked away in their monasteries, they took to reading and copying books, from the Bible to the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In an age before the printing press, they had to copy manuscripts by hand. (To get a feel for this task, spend ten minutes copying text from your own favorite book. To mimic the monks' working conditions, do this in the cold, by candlelight.) Given the difficulty of this labor, it is unsurprising that the margins of medieval texts are sometimes littered with complaints: "Oh, my hand"; "I am very cold"; "Now I've written the whole thing . . . give me a drink."[4] As if the work itself weren't hard enough, the monasteries were sometimes attacked, despite their remote locations. The monastery at Skellig Michael, a rock island eight miles off the Irish coast, was routinely

attacked by Viking raiders. The monastic village at Glendalough was destroyed by fire at least nine times in 300 years. To keep their books safe from invaders' clutches, the monks often buried them, or sent them to more secure locations.[5] It is hard to overstate the importance of such efforts. In his bestselling book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill remarks,

> Without the Mission of the Irish Monks, who single-handedly re-founded European civilization throughout the continent in the bays and valleys of their exile, the world that came after them would have been an entirely different one. . . . And our own world would never have come to be.[6]

Faced with daunting challenges, the Irish monks preserved knowledge during a Dark Age—intellectual perseverance at work.

We could multiply examples. Doing so would and will help us understand the intellectual virtues in greater depth. Stay tuned. For now, let's pause and consider the nature of the intellectual virtues. That is, let's unpack our account of intellectual virtues as the character traits of excellent thinkers. This will sharpen our vision of the virtues and prepare us for the chapters ahead.

Three Features of an Intellectual Virtue

Intellectual virtues are intellectually excellent features of persons. But not all intellectually excellent features of persons are virtues in the sense relevant to our study. In particular, intellectual virtues are different from excellent *faculties* (e.g., good eyesight), *talents* (say, being naturally smart), and *skills* (e.g., computer coding). What sets intellectual virtues apart is that they are good *character traits*. Specifically, they are good dispositions involving our thoughts, motives, and actions in relation to truth, knowledge, and understanding.[7]

To sort out the differences between faculties, talents, skills, and intellectual virtues, it will help to imagine an excellent thinker at work. Suppose she's a physicist trying to apply a difficult math equation, or a city planner puzzling over crime statistics. How will she use good judgment in order to apply the right problem-solving techniques? What will motivate her? What will she do as she sets out to solve the problem? The details will depend on the specific case. But we might expect her intellectual virtue to be expressed in ways like these: She will think well by selecting strategies that have worked on similar problems. She will desire to find knowledge and understanding. She will want to avoid false solutions, and will shun sloppy thinking. She will feel excited at the prospect of discovery. She will persist in working at the problem longer than a mediocre thinker would.

As our example illustrates, intellectual virtues generally have three components—one each for thought, motivation, and action. In typical virtuous thinkers, these components look something like this:

- *Thinking component*: virtuous thinkers believe that knowledge is valuable. They think it's unfortunate for a person to have false or unreasonable beliefs, or to be ignorant. They use good judgment in choosing their intellectual projects. They seek knowledge about what they rightly consider important. They wisely determine when to pursue their projects. When they seek knowledge, they use appropriate means and methods (say, reliable reasoning instead of guesswork). They believe that knowledge—along with truth and understanding—is worth keeping and sharing.
- *Motivational component*: virtuous thinkers desire true beliefs, knowledge, and understanding. They want to avoid falsehood and ignorance. They want their beliefs to be reasonable. They feel joy at the prospect of gaining knowledge, and feel an aversion to falsehood and ignorance. They value and care deeply

about truth and knowledge for their own sakes, and not just for the sake of, say, money or praise.[8]

- *Action (behavioral) component*: virtuous thinkers act according to patterns of thought and motivation like those just mentioned. They do this in order to gain, keep, and share truth, knowledge, and understanding. They act in these ways consistently, across time, and in different settings.

The details of these components will become clearer in due course. But even this description should help us see that intellectual virtues differ from excellent faculties, talents, and skills. Let's spell this out a bit.

Intellectual virtues require excellence in thought, motivation, and action in relation to knowledge. Not so for faculties, talents, or skills. Someone might have the faculty of excellent eyesight, but this is not a virtue in the sense at issue here. Joe Bloggs can have 20/20 vision but be completely bereft of intellectual virtue. He might be arrogant, dogmatic, and so on.

It's similar with talent. We can easily imagine a genius-level talent—say, someone with an IQ of 190—who cares nothing for knowledge, and doesn't think it is valuable. By way of her talent, she might display a kind of intellectual excellence. But she lacks intellectual virtue because she isn't motivated to get knowledge or to keep or share it. Raw intelligence isn't enough to ensure a virtuous mind.

Finally, we can imagine a person who is intellectually skilled, but who is lazy and so never uses those skills for the sake of knowledge—or who puts them to use in the service of intellectually bad ends (recall Orwell's deceptive politicians from chapter 1). It is possible to be highly skilled but wholly lacking in intellectual virtue.

We can sum up the point of the last few paragraphs like this. Unlike our faculties, talents, and skills, our intellectual character expresses a lot about who we are *as persons*. For instance, it reveals

whether or not we think knowledge is valuable. It shows whether or not we care about truth and understanding. It makes clear whether we desire these goods or are indifferent to them. If we don't exhibit excellence along these dimensions, we don't have a virtuous intellectual character—even if our faculties, talents, and skills are top-notch.

Locating the Intellectual Virtues

As soon as we identify intellectual virtues as character traits, we face questions. What's the difference between moral and intellectual virtues? And what distinguishes intellectual virtues from intellectual vices? Let's take these questions in turn.

First: how do intellectual virtues differ from moral virtues? There's much to say here. But given our purposes, we can leave it at this: the difference between the two lies in their aims. Intellectual virtues aim at things like truth, knowledge, and understanding. Moral virtues need not have this focus. Rather, they aim at things like justice, kindness, and the reduction of pain. Thinkers who are intellectually curious, humble, fair-minded, and so on, *must* care about knowledge. That's part of what it is to be intellectually virtuous. By contrast, a morally compassionate person—Mother Teresa, say—can exercise her compassion without aiming to get, keep, or share knowledge. Her aim—her main motivation—is to alleviate the suffering of those in her care. As we saw in chapter 1, the two kinds of virtue often overlap in the real world. But again, our main focus will be the intellectual virtues.[9]

Second: what distinguishes intellectual virtues from intellectual vices? We can find help in answering this question by borrowing an image from Aristotle: the image of the mean.[10] In distinguishing *moral* virtues from moral vices, Aristotle argues that many virtues may be found in a mean between extremes of deficiency and excess. These extremes are *vices*. Consider the virtue of courage. Aristotle

understands this as a mean between cowardice and rashness. On the deficiency side, we might imagine an otherwise normal grown-up cowering under a blanket for fear of the dark. That's cowardly. On the excess side, we might imagine a soldier who needlessly runs into enemy fire, oblivious to danger. That's rash. The courageous person, says Aristotle, finds the mean between the two.

We can use Aristotle's understanding of moral virtues to improve our grasp of *intellectual* virtues.[11] Like the moral virtues, many intellectual virtues exist as a mean between vices. There are deficiencies and excesses of intellectual character; the virtues stand between them. We can depict the traits as in table 2.1.

All intellectual virtues involve a positive orientation toward truth, knowledge, and understanding. This is what unifies the intellectual

Table 2.1 Intellectual Virtue as a Mean between Vices

Sphere of activity	Vice (deficiency)	Virtue (mean)	Vice (excess)
Managing our intellectual appetite	Indifference	Curiosity	Gluttony
Reasoning from evidence	Carelessness	Carefulness	Scrupulousness
Independent thinking	Servility	Autonomy	Isolation
Assessing our weaknesses	Arrogance	Humility	Self-deprecation
Assessing our strengths	Self-deprecation	Self-confidence	Arrogance
Overcoming obstacles	Irresolution	Perseverance	Intransigence
Persisting despite threats	Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Transcending our perspective	Closed-mindedness	Open-mindedness	Indiscriminateness
Maintaining our perspective	Spinelessness	Firmness	Rigidity

virtues. But as table 2.1 suggests, each intellectual virtue also concerns a different area of activity. This helps distinguish intellectual virtues from each other. For instance, intellectual *autonomy* is the virtue most relevant when it comes to thinking for ourselves. The autonomous thinker avoids the deficiency of servility. She doesn't *just* rely on others when considering what she should think. She doesn't farm out her intellectual life. Rather, she takes responsibility for her own beliefs. But she also avoids the excess of isolation. She doesn't ignore others' valuable insights or expert advice. She doesn't live on an intellectual island. In determining when and how to think for herself, she finds the mean.

Another example: we often need to consider new ideas—even ideas contrary to our own. *Open-mindedness* is the virtue needed to take seriously the merits of those ideas. Now, it's easy to mistake this virtue for an uncritical willingness to listen to anything. But notice: not just any activity in this area will count as virtuously open-minded. A recent headline in *The Onion* clowns, "Open-Minded Man Grimly Realizes How Much Life He's Wasted Listening to Bullshit." The article goes on to describe Blake Richman, a 38-year-old man who has squandered his life listening to others' inane blathering, half-formed thoughts, and asinine suggestions.[12] Despite the article's headline, however, *that* is not open-mindedness. It's the excess of indiscriminateness. The genuinely open-minded person avoids this vice, along with its opposite, closed-mindedness—an unwillingness to take seriously even new ideas that have merit.

As table 2.1 shows, many other intellectual virtues similarly lie in a mean between extremes.*

The image of the mean gives us a good start in identifying several intellectual virtues and distinguishing them from their corresponding

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* Perhaps not all intellectual virtues will fit into this framework. For instance, it is not clear that honesty (chapter 7) has an intellectual excess. Further, it is not clear that in all cases, exceeding a virtue is vicious. In chapter 11, I'll suggest that intellectual charity goes beyond fair-mindedness, but is virtuous nonetheless. Despite its limitations, this vice-virtue-vice picture will prove helpful as we seek to understand several intellectual virtues.

vices. However, taken alone, it's not as informative as we might like. Just learning that virtues stand between vices does not tell us why virtues are excellent. After all, sometimes, to be in the middle is to be *mediocre.* Nor does our vice-virtue-vice picture register the many ways we can fail to be virtuous. (As we'll see, there's more to it than "too little" and "too much.") Further, the simple image of the mean doesn't reveal how virtues and vices express our character—how they show what motivates us. To illuminate these issues, we need another image from Aristotle: the image of the archer.[13]

Acting with moral virtue, says Aristotle, is like hitting a target with an arrow: there are many ways to miss, but only one bullseye. An excellent archer hits the center of the target, shooting neither left nor right, high nor low. Similarly, Aristotle says, the morally virtuous person does the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reason. In other words, a virtuous act requires the right object, occasion, means, and motivation. This is Aristotle's true, nuanced doctrine of the mean.[14] We can envision it as shown in figure 2.1.

This image promises to enrich our understanding of virtues.[15] It helps us see why the virtues are excellent. They are excellent
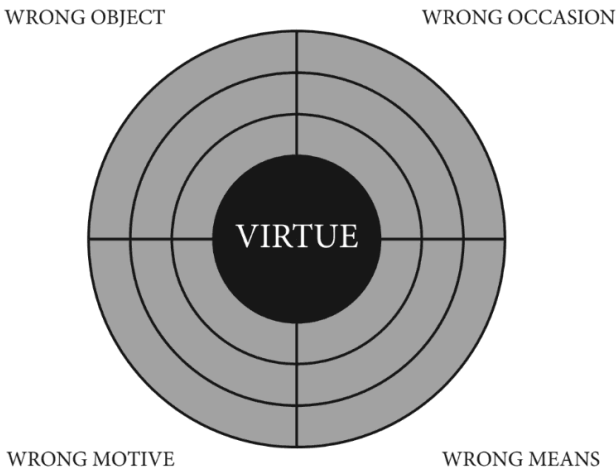

Figure 2.1 Virtue as Hitting the Target