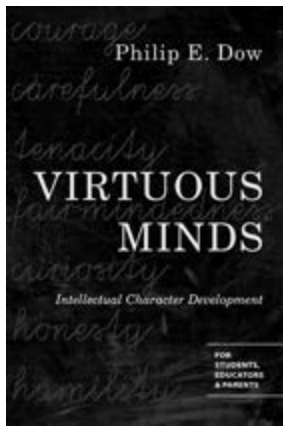




VIRTUOUS MINDS

INTELLECTUAL CHARACTER
DEVELOPMENT (DOW, 2013)



BOOK REVIEW by Chris Parker

Not only is this book the first of its kind—as outlined on the dust jacket—it is an important book for those exploring Christian education. If Christian education involves character development of the whole child, then it must include what the author himself describes, in the subtitle, as “intellectual character development”. Dow (2013) suggests that “When we think of character, we usually think of moral character ... Our intellectual character influences our lives as much as moral character does, and with at least as much force” (p. 22). Whether our intellectual character is separate from our broader pursuit of virtuous character, is perhaps a moot point. However, the separation is helpful for Dow as he makes the valid point that our intellectual character development is often neglected, or at least suffering from an apathy that is given space when the emphasis is on moral virtue.

The Christian school is the obvious place where this unequal emphasis can be, and perhaps ought be addressed—given the educational focus of a school’s mission. It is also the perfect place for students to learn and *practice* virtuous intellectual character.

The book is divided into three parts:

- Part 1 The Seven Intellectual Virtues
- Part 2 The Fruits of Intellectual Character
- Part 3 Becoming People of Intellectual Character

The great strength of this book—especially for the Christian teacher—is Part 1. When considering the shaping of culture in our Christian school classrooms, we would do well to consider how these virtues may be nurtured, practiced, and woven into the cultural narrative/s of the class community. The virtues suggested are: intellectual courage; intellectual carefulness; intellectual tenacity; intellectual fair-mindedness; intellectual curiosity; intellectual honesty; and intellectual humility. Allow me to use a few direct quotes from Dow to describe each one.

Intellectual Courage

This virtue clearly flows from the gospel of grace of the Lord Jesus. It is grounded in risk taking that is self-sacrificial. This courage is founded on a love of truth over and above a fear of others. Dow states:

Those who are intellectually courageous earnestly want to know the truth, and so they take risks in the pursuit and promotion of truth. They are willing to reconsider their own beliefs, even if this scares them. (p. 28)

Dow has us consider this concrete example:

Consider the young student deciding whether to raise her hand in class. If she does raise her hand, she is risking the mockery of her peers, who will either see that she doesn’t understand the material or tease her for being overly enthusiastic. Yet, without this small act of courage her growth is stunted. She begins to fall further and further behind, and a self-fulfilling cycle of fear and ignorance is initiated. (p. 29)

You may recognise overlaps here with the notion of growth mindset suggested by Dweck (2008) and discussed in the article “Growth Mindset Teaching in a God Mindset Classroom” also in this edition.

Dow also describes how intellectual courage is the foundation for the other virtues. For example:

Honest thinking, for instance, almost always includes the likelihood of personal sacrifice and usually includes the frightening prospect of direct confrontation. As a result, it can rightfully be said that if we are not courageous thinkers, we are unlikely to be truly honest thinkers. The same principle holds true for those who want to be fair-minded in their thinking habits. Reflect on the tremendous courage needed to impartially consider arguments that threaten your most fundamental beliefs. (p. 28)

Intellectual Carefulness

When motivated by the gospel and the desire to bring God glory, attention to detail may be seen as an intellectual virtue. Dow suggests that:

Those who are intellectually careful earnestly want to know the truth; thus they are reasonably and consistently careful that they do not overlook important details and habitually avoid hasty conclusions based on limited evidence. They are patient and diligent in their pursuit of knowledge. (p. 34)

... whatever the cause, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we have a tough time sticking with something when the going gets tough.

He also helpfully describes such a virtue by giving an example of the opposite—intellectual haste:

Another slightly different form of intellectual carelessness that seems to be rampant in our culture is intellectual hastiness, ... How often, for instance, do we uncritically accept casual office gossip or leap to hasty judgements about others based on innuendo or flimsy circumstantial evidence? (pp. 36-37)

Dow suggests a litmus test for this virtue, and its opposite, by suggesting that “If you are still tempted to think that intellectual character has little to do with practical Christian living, try loving your neighbour as yourself while practising intellectual hastiness. It cannot be done” (p. 37).

Intellectual Tenacity

Dow only briefly surveys the cultural and technological influences that have impacted on tenacity of thought—from TV through to the Internet and mobile ‘devices’. However, his conclusion is all too apparent for teachers working with modern students (and even when we reflect on our own development of this virtue). Dow observes that “whatever the cause, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we have a tough time sticking with something when the going gets tough” (p. 40).

You might also here be prompted to consider the notion of ‘grit’ being a growing educational buzz word flowing from the work of Duckworth (2018).

Tenacity habituated into a virtue, suggests Dow, is necessary for growth and transformation:

Tenacious thinking is also needed in order to grow beyond our current limitations. Like many artists, my friends don’t gravitate towards the hard sciences and even tend to shy away from the so called social sciences, such as history. They aren’t naturally gifted in these areas, and they certainly don’t have a passion for them. And yet, without battling through the frustrating process of understanding physics, biology and history the scope and depth of their art would forever be limited. (p. 42)

In speaking of the importance for intellectual tenacity in learning, Dow suggest that “in both our actions and our thinking habits, tenacity is often the difference between success and failure, fulfilment and frustration” (p. 39).

Intellectual Fair-Mindedness

Dow describes this virtue suggesting that:

Those who are fair-minded earnestly want to know the truth and thus are willing to listen in an even-handed way to differing opinions, even if they already have strong views on the subject. In addition, they attempt to view the issue from the perspective of their opponents, believing that they do not always have the most complete or accurate vantage point on a given issue. The secret of an intellectually fair-minded person is that they have chosen to put the truth over allegiance to their ego or cherished opinions. (p. 49)

The most helpful aspect of Dow’s exploration of this virtue is the clear suggestion that although fair-mindedness and relativistic openness might look similar they are fundamentally opposed to each other. Our students are being shaped by a cultural storyline that conflates the two. Dow describes the impact of this on learning:

As we have seen, relativistic openness and fair-mindedness often look deceptively similar in practice, but they are fundamentally different perspectives that bear dramatically different fruits. Relativistic openness rejects our belief in transcendent truth and therefore undermines the learning process and the concept of progress while leading us toward lives of shallow gullibility. Fair-mindedness, on the other hand, is rooted in the idea that truth not only exists but it can be found when, by consistently seeking the truth over the satisfaction of our egos, we slowly become fair-minded people. This is the openness that invigorates learning, builds a solid foundation upon which to live, and leads us toward lives of wisdom, richness and depth. (p. 54)

Intellectual Curiosity

Dow claims that “... intellectual curiosity remains one of the most important and foundational of the intellectual virtues. Unless we are in the habit of asking why questions, we will remain in neutral, never growing and never experiencing the richness that comes from a well examined life” (p. 58). The implications for education are clear. As Postman and Weingartner (1969) famously stated when reflecting on the practices, narratives, and culture of classrooms, “Children enter school as question marks and leave as periods” (p. 58). The Christian teacher committed to nurturing grace-shaped

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classroom climates with be fuelled by Dow's observations of the life-implications of curiosity-deadening cultures:

Unfortunately, whether it was the mockery of our peers in school, a fear of betraying our ignorance or the assumption that we know as much as we need to know, somewhere along the way, most of us have gotten out of the habit of asking why questions. To the degree that this has happened, we have also ceased to grow intellectually. If this stunted growth were only found in areas of our lives apparently far removed from practical living ... then we might be forgiven for concluding that our lack of intellectual curiosity was harmless. The chances are, however, that a lack of curiosity in one area of our lives is only a symptom of a more pervasive mental atrophy. (p. 59)

Intellectual Honesty

Dow is careful to point out that intellectual honesty is not so much focused on the gaining of knowledge as “how we choose to use and present the knowledge we already have” (p. 61). He explains this virtue by describing the aim of an intellectually honest person is:

... to communicate what they know with integrity. Because their main objective is to help others get at the truth, they are consistently careful not to use information taken out of context, to distort the truth by describing it with loaded language or to otherwise mislead through the manipulation of statistics or any other type of supporting evidence. In addition, intellectually honest people do not take credit for evidence or ideas that are not their own, and so are careful to cite the work of others whenever it is used. (p. 61)

The self-sacrifice, and sense of service to others, bound in this virtue move us towards a pursuit of truth, and knowing, through Christ-likeness.

Intellectual Humility

Although Dow recognises that humans, being made in the image of God, have great and beautiful intellectual capacity, he also proposes that we seek an intellectual humility due to the effects of the fall. Our reasoning, and knowing, have been tainted and so we are humble about our own intellectual conclusions, and we are generously sceptical towards the conclusions of others. He describes this as follows:

In other words, to the extent that we are rooted in reality, we will be intellectually humble; and this humility will extend not only to our own intellectual capacity but also to how we assess human reasoning generally. (p. 71)

Conclusion

In Part 2, Dow explores the benefits or “fruits” of cultivating these virtues. He explores the benefits of “knowing more about more”; the benefits of “better thinking”; and opportunities for being able to love God with our intellects. Dow helpfully sums up loving God this way by stating “Therefore, when we are successful in achieving intellectual excellence, we are bringing honour to God—the author and perfect embodiment of reason and truth” (p. 98). We assume here that Dow is hinting at the incarnation of all wisdom and knowledge in the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 1:30).

In Part 3 Dow makes practical suggestions for the cultivation of virtuous intellectual character including things like accountability and time use etc. He finishes with suggestions to parents and teachers that are certainly not unhelpful. The appendix that serves as a discussion guide for university students may well be a helpful resource for Christian school staff to explore.

Do you sometimes, after reading a book, wonder what you would want to ask an author if you found yourself sitting next to them at dinner? I highly recommend this book to Christian educators (and parents). However, what I would like to explore with Philip E. Dow between main and dessert is what do we say to our students (and ourselves) when we keep failing in our pursuit of intellectual integrity. It's a noble, God-honouring, and even Christ-like pursuit, but we will fail at times. How do we wrap the gospel of grace around this pursuit so that our intellectual pursuits don't get absorbed into a storyline of self-salvation?

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