The Possibility of Virtue Ethics in Information Literacy

Intellectual Virtues and the Consideration of Truth

Ezra Choe, Theology and Philosophy Librarian, Baylor University

ABSTRACT Virtue ethics has recently enjoyed a resurgence in contemporary scholarship, especially concerning its practical and epistemic dimensions. Librarians have also been part of these recent conversations, especially in information literacy. For example, in his recent book *Virtue Information Literacy: Flourishing in an Age of Information Anarchy*, Wayne Bivens-Tatum underscores the need to cultivate intellectual virtues to navigate through the world of anarchy. Intellectual or epistemic virtues such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, epistemic modesty, etc., are all necessary for information users to flourish in an age where information is readily available. While affirming the virtue ethics framework for information literacy, in this paper, I will present potential problems to the virtue ethics framework by calling into question the object of intellectual or epistemic virtues, namely consideration of truth. Librarians adopting the virtue ethics framework should consider the metatheoretical assumptions of the framework itself and understand the inherent challenges it poses, one of which is that virtues are goal oriented.

INTRODUCTION

It seems like virtue ethics is fashionable again, especially in educational settings. Indeed, there has been a re-emergence of virtue ethics literature and research primarily on how educators can implement virtue ethics in their teaching, e.g., *Oxford Character Project, Jubilee Center for Character and Virtue, The Human Flourishing Project*, etc. What is fashionable, however, is usually transient. For librarians to appropriate virtue ethics successfully, I propose that librarians should acknowledge and affirm a key metatheoretical assumptions underlying the framework itself. Otherwise, it risks becoming another trend. In what follows, I will give a brief overview of virtue ethics and focus on the *intellectual*

virtues. I then examine the merits of this approach in the context of librarianship and information literacy and proceed to identify one key component that librarians should affirm when appropriating a virtue-centered approach to information literacy and librarianship in general, that is, the fundamental epistemic good of intellectual virtues is *truth*.

THE APPEAL OF VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics seem to have a universal appeal. In addition to western approaches, which has its root primarily in Aristotle, there are rich traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc. There are important convergences within all these traditions, but also potential irreconcilable differences. One commonality is the idea of cultivating virtues for a life of *flourishing*. Identifying these virtues and articulating what a life of *flourishing* looks like, however, differs from each tradition. Each traditions have meaningful contribution to a wholistic understanding of virtue. It would be impossible to examine each distinctives in this paper and therefore, I will restrict myself to the predominant school of virtue ethics in the Aristotelian-Thomistic (henceforth, A-T) tradition.

So, what is virtue? In general, we can understand virtue as an excellent trait of character which an agent comes to possess (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2022)initially, be identified as the one that emphasizesthe virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach thatemphasizes duties or rules (deontology. In the A-T tradition, the four cardinal virtues are necessary for the moral life: wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance all of which are required for *flourishing*. Since flourishing is a central component in the virtue ethics paradigm, I think it is appropriate that we get a clearer sense of what this term means. In fact, one could argue that flourishing is the proper aim of education and is the key difference between other normative ethical approaches to education.

In his book *Flourishing as the Aim of Education*, Kristjánsson defines human flourishing as:

> the (relatively) unencumbered, freely chosen and developmentally progressive activity of a meaningful (subjectively purposeful and objectively valuable) life that actualises satisfactorily an individual human being's natural capacities in areas of species-specific existential tasks at which human beings (as rational, social, moral and emotional agents) can most successfully excel. (2020, 1)

To be sure, Kristjánsson recognizes the complexity of his proposed definition, and he proceeds to unfold this concept throughout the rest of the book (2020, 2). What is helpful in Kristjánsson's definition of human flourishing are the various assumptions about human nature that aid in our understanding of virtue. Flourishing entails individual agents to actualizes our natural capacities, inclinations, or powers. Cultivating and possessing virtue means that we are becoming more human; we are fulfilling those natural capacities which allows us to become more attuned to our human nature.

The very idea of human flourishing should be attractive to librarians and educators as it resists the idea of emphasizing outcomes based on skills alone. Other normative ethical approaches such as consequentialism and deontology are prone to this type of outcome-based thinking. Instead of focusing primarily on helping students obtain a certain grade, academic competencies, or job, a virtue-centered approach to education and librarianship emphasizes a different outcome. While acknowledging the importance of skill-based outcomes, virtue-centered approach to librarianship and education places a higher emphasis on helping students develop moral and intellectual characters that are essential to a life of flourishing. Libraries as institutions play a formative role in helping to shape students intellectually despite the deep skepticism people have for higher education and libraries. This, I think, gives us a renewed sense of purpose for our work as librarians and educators alike despite the limitation and challenges we face – how can librarians become exemplars to our students, how can we promote dialogue that increase virtue literacy, etc.? Philosopher Gregory Bassham puts it this way: "What qualities of heart, mind, and character would we ideally like our students to value, choose, and possess? What moral and intellectual excellences should we seek to cultivate in our students" (2013, 12).

Another important aspect of the virtue-centered approach is the necessity of both the *moral* and *intellectual* virtues conducive for a life of flourishing. Like most issues in philosophy, there are substantial disagreements as to how both relate to each other. In his book, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*, Jason Baehr gives three theses to frame this discussion (2011, 206-207). First, there is the *reductive thesis* according to which no principal distinction can be made between moral and intellectual virtues. Secondly, the *subset thesis* says that the intellectual virtues are subsets of moral virtues but are unified in a way that sets them

apart from each other. Finally, the *independence thesis* which states that intellectual virtues are not a proper subset of moral virtues but are rather "fundamentally distinct from moral virtues" (2011, 207). Baehr opts for an even more nuanced approach and thinks that the distinction lies between the *subset thesis* and the *independence thesis*.

One way to potentially distinguish between the two types of virtues is by offering a teleological explanation. That is, the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues can be understood in terms of its purpose or aim. Whereas the moral virtues aim for moral ends, intellectual virtues are aimed towards epistemic ends, one of which is truth. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas also observes that virtue is rightly divided into moral and intellectual virtue depending on what part of the soul it corresponds to:

> Human virtue is a habit perfecting man in view of his doing good deeds. Now, in man there are but two principles of human actions, viz. the intellect or reason and the appetite: for these are the two principles of movement in man as stated in De Anima iii, text. 48. Consequently every human virtue must needs be a perfection of one of these principles. Accordingly if it perfects man's speculative or practical intellect in order that his deed may be good, it will be an intellectual virtue: whereas if it perfects his appetite, it will be a moral virtue. It follows therefore that every human virtue is either intellectual or moral. (ST, I-II, q. 58, a. 2)

There is of course a teleological assumption here in the text as the two principles movement in man (reason and appetite) are ordered to truth and goodness. To be sure, merely pointing to the teleological explanation as the only criterion for distinguishing moral and intellectual virtue may not be sufficient as moral ends seem to be more diverse and abstract compared to intellectual ends. In other words, more would have to be said about the underlying concept of morality and a mere appeal to human flourishing, according to Baehr, is "unlikely to mitigate this challenge" (2011, 214).

So, what exactly is an intellectual virtue? Recall that virtue in general is an excellent trait of character that an agent comes to possess. Intellectual virtue then, are those stable dispositions that disposes people to think well in the context of inquiring, learning, and reasoning. The contrary intellectual vices, on the other hand, are those dispositions that impede one from inquiring, learning, and reasoning (2021, 31). Despite the aforementioned difficulty of how the intellectual and moral virtues relate, it is clear that the teleological explanation aids in our understanding of what intellectual virtues are.

The virtues dispose people for purposes of inquiring, learning, and reasoning and hence are ordered to some epistemic good, viz. truth.

There is no standard list of intellectual virtues but that does not mean that the list is arbitrary. For example, most philosophers would agree that intellectual humility, the virtue through which one acknowledges one's own limitation and mistakes, is important to learning and reasoning. A detailed classification of the intellectual virtues and its basis is beyond the scope of this paper. Factors like religion and culture all play a role in shaping what should count as an intellectual virtue. This needs to be recognized as virtue ethics has many traditions. For present purposes, we can accept Wayne Bivens-Tatum's list of intellectual virtues and vices which he articulates in his excellent book *Virtue Information Literacy*. He lists the following: open-mindedness/close-mindedness, intellectual humility/intellectual arrogance, epistemic modesty/ignarrogance, intellectual courage/cowardice, intellectual caution/rashness, intellectual thoroughness/laziness, epistemic justice/testimonial injustice, information vigilance/distraction (2022, 4–5).

Bivens-Tatum echoes a similar reason I have stated before as to why librarians should appropriate virtue ethics and apply them in information literacy, an approach he calls *virtue information literacy*. These intellectual virtues ethics are necessary for a life of flourishing because we are in an era of information anarchy. For Bivens-Tatum, we live in a time where there are no clear authorities controlling the follow of information, and we are free to choose what we consume; information seekers are confronted with a deluged of information such as "political propaganda, advertising, marketing, corporate media, alternative media, social media, scholarly publications, and more" (2022, 1). Because of this, individuals should cultivate a range of intellectual virtues to critically think about the information sources they consume. Flourishing, as mentioned, makes us more human since we act according to our rational nature. Information anarchy and overload makes us vulnerable to intellectual vices which nurtures the spread of misinformation and sustains echo-chambers; we become less human when we indulge in these vices. Intentionally cultivating intellectual virtues, while not sufficient, is necessary to flourish in an era of information anarchy.

Additionally, there are other reasons why librarians should adopt this framework in the context of information literacy, or at least consider it. First of all, intellectual virtues are directly mentioned in

the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy. For example, in the threshold concept of "Research as Inquiry", the authors note that the information literate individual "demonstrates intellectual humility (i.e., recognize their own intellectual or experiential limitations;" Association of Colleges & Research Libraries 2015). Moreover, each of the threshold concepts imply a steady cultivation of other intellectual virtues. For example, "Scholarship as Conversation" certainly requires open-mindedness and intellectual humility. The "Framework for Information Literacy" also includes indirect language that affirms a virtue-centered approach especially aligned with the A-T tradition, i.e., *disposition*. Intellectual virtues are dispositions that can be actualized, and while the authors of the Framework probably did not have the A-T tradition in mind, it does indicate that virtue development is perhaps a central component for information literacy. David McMenemy and Steven Buchanan make a similar observation when they highlight the use of the term *disposition* in the Framework. They think that this tern aligns well with virtue epistemology approach to information literacy, and that "this is a potential indication that the approach taken in the development of the Framework is cognizant of character issues" (McMenemy and Buchanan 2019, 78).

Our discussion thus far has examined what the intellectual virtues are and why it is good for librarians to appropriate or at least consider a virtue-centered approach. Now I want to turn to a particular claim about intellectual virtues which I find necessary and essential for librarians to consider. The central claim is that all the intellectual virtues are ordered to truth as the fundamental epistemic good. I have already hinted at the fact that there is a teleological assumption in the virtue ethics framework. From an epistemic point of view, *truth* is non-instrumentally valuable: all other epistemic goods (e.g., justification) are instrumental relative to the truth (Pritchard 2021b, 5516). The corollary of this claim is that agents of intellectual virtues desire truth. The philosopher Duncan Pritchard calls this motivation state *veritic desire*, whereby the "intellectually virtuous subject rightly value truth for its own sake because they recognize that truth is valuable for its own sake" (2021, 1). This is also affirmed in the A-T tradition as well, as Aquinas notes, "...every virtue is ordained to some good...they may indeed be called virtues in so far as they confer aptness for a good work, viz. the consideration of truth" (ST, I-II, q. 57, a. 1). Previously, I have mentioned that the answer distinction between moral and intellectual virtue lies, in part, due to

their natural ends: the intellectual virtue aiming towards truth and the moral virtues towards good. Even though the teleological answer is not decisive in differentiating the two types of virtues, the appeal to truth is necessary for any meaningful concept of intellectual virtues. If this is the case, then librarians appropriating the intellectual virtue framework should be concerned with truth in the context of information literacy.

On the other hand, Wayne Bivens-Tatum does not think that truth places a significant role in information literacy. In fact, he repeatedly wants to persuade readers to abandon the idea of truth in the context of information literacy: "…information literacy in general, and professional librarians in particular, have nothing to do with *truth* apart from socially constructed selves in scholarly conversation…if you think librarians and information literacy instructors have some concern for truth, I hope to persuade you otherwise (2022, 115). But severing truth from intellectual virtues undermines a key aspect of the whole framework itself: librarians should be concerned with truth especially when applying a virtue-centered framework namely because the framework demands it.

To be sure, there is always a pragmatic concern when it comes to the practicality of insisting on a particular aspect of the intellectual virtues. For example, if one adopts a particular theory of truth, let's say a *correspondence theory of truth* in the context of information literacy, does it really make a difference? Is veritic desire a necessary part of virtue epistemology? Bivens-Tatum is inclined to say that even if this picture is correct, "this is nothing that librarians are professionally concerned about" (2022, 134). Adding to this complication is that fact that pragmatists also disagree amongst themselves in regards to concepts of truth. Indeed, Bivens-Tatum rightly points out Peircean pragmatists like Cheryl Misak insists that the aim of inquiry and discourse is directed towards true belief — a view that is virtually identical with the veritic desire thesis (2022, 137). Yet Misak, like most pragmatists, deny a correspondence theory of truth. Others, notably Labaree and Scimeca, conclude similarly with Bivens-Tatum and say that a suspension of truth is necessary but only for a completely opposite reason. They think that adopting a particular theory of truth hinders librarians from performing their duties: "…librarians must suspend the truth value of singular items and artifacts in the historical record in order that the whole truth of any period of history be accurately analyzed and understood" (2008,

66). These concerns are difficult to answer and while I do not have concrete answers to these problems and have not attempted to address them in any adequate manner in this paper, I still think that it would be hard to ignore the concept of truth in relation to intellectual virtues since it is an essential concept within virtue epistemology. And these difficulties should be expected as virtue ethics itself is a normative approach which puts the onus on the agent on applying the virtues in various circumstances. There is no one right way to infuse intellectual virtues in information literacy but to leave out a core component from the framework would be, it seems to me, a mistake. As librarians start to apply intellectual virtues in librarianship and information literacy, a careful circumspection and prudence is needed when appropriating virtue information literacy so that we can truly help and instill virtues of the mind to our students in an era of information anarchy.

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