

The 7 Intellectual Virtues: Helpful Tools for Thinking Well

When we think of the words *virtue* or *character*, our minds usually go first to actionable morality. We think, for instance, of [chivalry](#) (say, a gentleman holding a door for a lady) or altruism (the willingness to give up personal pleasure to help someone else).

Philip E. Dow makes a good case, though, for virtue that extends beyond our actions. In his book [Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development](#), he lists and describes seven “intellectual virtues”—virtues that correlate to our mental habits—that are invaluable to thinking well. So, what are those seven virtues? And how can we apply them?

1. Intellectual Courage

We all admire the courageous: the mom who runs into a burning building to save her son, the spy who enters enemy territory on a dangerous mission, or the teenagers from [The Boys who Challenged Hitler](#) who used their talents to stand against the Nazi regime. The courageous [press on despite their fear](#), and they stand firm in their allegiance to what is good.

In the intellectual realm, courage involves the determined pursuit of and resolute commitment to truth, even when that truth might hurt. Are we willing to stand up for our beliefs? Are we willing to ask hard questions? And are we willing to press on in our thinking, even if it threatens to shake the foundations of our [worldview](#)? The intellectually courageous will answer “yes.”

2. Intellectual Carefulness

Intellectual carefulness is the second of the intellectual virtues, and it refers to the need to be mentally precise, patient, and attentive. Good thinkers must pay attention to the details surrounding their intellectual pursuits, and they must be careful to examine every part of their thinking or argument.

Dow refers to several examples of intellectual carefulness being neglected, some of which had drastic consequences. A [misattributed presidential quote](#) ran the risk of damaging popular author David McCullough's historical reputation, and a [single omitted computer symbol](#) caused the devastating crash of American spacecraft *Mariner 1*.

Though mistakes may not be intentional, they often reflect badly on the character of those who made them. "Intentional deception and intellectual carelessness both produce lies," Dow says, "and people don't trust liars."

3. Intellectual Tenacity

Tenacity is one of my favorite words. It's the noun form of the adjective *tenacious*, which [means](#) "persistent in maintaining, adhering to, or seeking something valued or desired." Intellectually tenacious people are willing to keep going, even in the face of opposition.

We see examples of intellectual tenacity all around us. There's the scientist who keeps experimenting after many failed attempts; the fiction writer who's on draft 28 and still revising; and the philosophy researcher who crafts and recrafts his argument as new evidence comes to light. "Good things take time," the saying goes, and the intellectually tenacious are willing to work long in their pursuit of truth.

4. Intellectual Fair-Mindedness

Dow points out three characteristics of an intellectually fair-minded person. First, they are open to evenhandedly weighing different opinions. Second, they try to see concepts or issues from their opponent's point of view. And third, they place the truth above their own ideas. In this way, the intellectually fair-minded approach the world from an evenhanded perspective, making sure that they're not so committed to their own thoughts that they don't consider another's.

In a practical context, fair-mindedness might mean examining both sides of an argument before making a decision, rephrasing an opponent's ideas before thinking of a response, or taking special care to listen before we speak. The fair-minded person will justly consider all points of view, recognizing that others' perspectives rarely exist without a reason.

5. Intellectual Curiosity

If you've been around small children, you know that the questions never stop. "Why is he doing that?" "Where are we going?" "Are we there yet?" Children know intuitively how to be curious, and they delight in exploring the world around them.

Like children, good thinkers should not be blandly content with their own (perhaps faulty) views of the world. Rather, they should explore the depth of reality surrounding them, asking wise questions and seeking to appropriately understand what's around them. "Unless we are in the habit of asking the why questions," Dow writes, "we will remain in neutral, never growing and never experiencing the richness that comes from a well-examined life."

6. Intellectual Honesty

There's not much that impresses me more than honesty. In a culture disturbingly [accustomed to lies](#), it can be hard to find somebody who's not willing to flatter, deceive, or twist the truth for personal gain. Still, it's important to portray truth, even when it hurts.

Intellectual honesty relates strongly to courage because—when we're tempted toward dishonesty—it's usually because honesty will harm us in some way. A student cheats on his exam to avoid a bad grade, or a professor fabricates some research to preserve his writing reputation. Courage can help us carry out the virtue of intellectual honesty, despite the unwanted consequences honesty sometimes brings.

7. Intellectual Humility

Nobody likes a bragger. In their intellectual lives, braggers can be doubly unlikeable because—in most cases—their pride will stand in the way of thoughtful interactions with a subject. They may become convinced they're right, even when there's strong evidence to the contrary.

Of course, intellectual humility does not require thinkers to conclude that they are incapable of finding truth. True intellectual humility means that thinkers have an accurate perception of their abilities and, when appropriate, wisely succumb to intellectual authorities.

What These Virtues Do

All seven of these intellectual virtues are essential to a solid intellectual life. Each of them addresses some aspect of mental character, calling us to interact wisely and honorably with our world. And they are each things we can practically apply and benefit from. As Dow says in an apt analogy about

the usefulness of intellectual character:

Intellectual character is like a bank that we can invest in or withdraw from. Every choice we make to train and improve our minds is another dollar in the back. Every time we decide to be lazy or flippant in our thinking we are taking another dollar out. When we come to make big decisions in life, we want to find an account overflowing with intellectual capital, not one long overdrawn.

In other words, intellectual virtues, when cultivated faithfully and applied well, will enrich and strengthen our mental lives.

—

Image credit: Flickr-Slices of Light, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

[IT0](#)