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## Foreword for *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development*

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## FOREWORD

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THIS BOOK IS THE FIRST OF ITS KIND and one that is urgently needed inside and outside the Christian community. Its subject matter is intellectual character. Typically, when we think of character, we are thinking of *moral* character, for example, of qualities like kindness, compassion and generosity. But the realm of personal character is not exhausted by the realm of moral character. It also has an *intellectual* dimension.

Your intellectual character consists of your inner attitudes and dispositions toward things like truth, knowledge and understanding. To get some idea of the quality of your intellectual character, consider the following questions: Do you care about learning and knowledge? Do you desire to understand the world around you? Are you curious about why things are the way they are, about the unfolding of history, and about what ultimately exists or what is ultimately good? Or, on the contrary, do you have a dim view of truth and knowledge? Or do you, perhaps, value knowledge and learning but only as a means to other ends, for example, to getting a job or impressing your friends? Are you indifferent to, or positively bored by, concepts like knowledge, truth and understanding?

Your answers to these questions say something important about the quality of your intellectual character. This is because good or “virtuous” intellectual character is marked, first and foremost, by a

deep and abiding love of truth, a desire to know and understand things as they really are. Virtuous intellectual character also involves a number of other traits that arise from a love of truth, including inquisitiveness, attentiveness, intellectual carefulness and thoroughness, fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, caution, tenacity and rigor. These traits are called “intellectual virtues.” By contrast, bad or defective intellectual character is marked by a lack of concern with, or a positive disregard for, knowledge and truth and, more specifically, by traits such as intellectual laziness, carelessness, superficiality, narrow-mindedness, dishonesty and cowardice. These are known as “intellectual vices.”

Theologians and philosophers have long been concerned with moral virtues such as those mentioned above and with theological virtues such as faith, hope and love. There are great and venerable treatises on these topics that date all the way back to the ancient Greek and early medieval periods. Surprisingly, however, these thinkers have had relatively little to say about the *intellectual* virtues—about the intellectual or cognitive dimension of personal character. This neglect of intellectual virtue at the scholarly level has had substantial and unfortunate consequences at the popular level. It has left the average person without the vocabulary or conceptual resources even to understand what virtuous intellectual character *is*, let alone to focus on it in a way that might actually lead to its realization. It has also left those outside the ivory tower (and many within it) unable to comprehend and evaluate significant events or persons around them. We have a hard time, for instance, understanding how a really smart scientist might perpetrate a major intellectual hoax. Or how a well-intentioned or morally upright person might misuse or ignore important evidence. In the first case, we fail to see that remarkable intelligence and impressive academic credentials are no guarantee that a person will actually care about truth—or, at least, care about it

more than other values such as money, power and professional prestige. In the second case, we fail to see that a person might care sincerely about certain moral values such as freedom or justice while failing to give sufficient respect to the value of truth. In either case, the defects in question are defects of intellectual character.

Surely this academic and popular neglect of matters of intellectual character is a regrettable state of affairs—particularly when viewed from a Christian standpoint. While this seems obvious to me, and possibly to you, I shall briefly enumerate four reasons why Christians in particular should care about and give special attention to the intellectual dimension of personal character.

First, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures place a premium on a concern with or desire for truth. As the psalmist proclaims: “Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place” (Psalm 51:6). This theme is spread throughout the Scriptures: for instance, in the call to treat “understanding” and “wisdom” like “silver” and to “search for it as for hidden treasure” (Proverbs 2:1-5); or in the apostle Paul’s high regard for the Christians in Berea, who “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11); or in his admonition to the church in Thessalonica not to “treat prophecies with contempt,” but to “test them all” and “hold on to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21); or in Jesus’ statement that he *is* the truth (John 14:6). As noted above, a concern with truth is the very heart of virtuous intellectual character; it is what gives rise to the range of individual intellectual virtues such as reflectiveness, attentiveness, fair-mindedness, intellectual carefulness and courage.

But should Christians really care about knowledge or truth *in general*? Or should they, perhaps, care merely about biblical or theological knowledge? In this connection, it is often pointed out, correctly, that God has given to humanity two books: the inspired

Jewish and Christian Scriptures and the “book of nature.” To care about knowledge in general—including the subject matter of history, mathematics, economics, psychology, philosophy and the like—is to care about the content of this second book. Similarly, it is often said that “all truth is God’s truth,” meaning that God and God alone is the ultimate source of all that is. If this is right, then Christians need not limit themselves to biblical or theological knowledge. For in doing so, they cut themselves off from a deeper and more profound understanding of the creation and its Creator.

Second, consider Jesus’ graphic and startling condemnation of the Pharisees: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27). The implication is that to be truly good, to follow Jesus and his Father in the manner they intend, is to be transformed *from the inside out*. Mere external obedience—of which the Pharisees were masters—is woefully inadequate. What is it, then, to be transformed from the inside out? This depends in part on what we are like on the inside, that is, on the actual content of human nature and psychology. Clearly, part of who we are on the inside consists of our attitudes, feelings, motivations, beliefs and thinking *as they relate to* things like knowledge, truth and understanding. Assuming the latter are genuine values in God’s eyes, then to the extent that we fail to care about truth or knowledge, we remain immature or defective as human beings. Put another way, part of Christian transformation is transformation of the intellectual dimension of personal character, that is, of our attitudes, motivations and feelings about truth, knowledge and related cognitive values. This is reminiscent of Paul’s admonition to the Christians in Rome to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

Third, one of the great and daunting commands of Jesus is to love our neighbors—including even our *enemies*—as ourselves. But what exactly does this require? What sorts of things must we actually *do* if we are to follow this command? My suggestion is that part of loving our neighbors and enemies as ourselves is exercising a range of intellectual virtues in our interactions with them. If I feed and clothe my neighbor but distort, belittle or otherwise disrespect his beliefs, then surely I fail to love him as Christ commands. This is a reflection of the fact that our beliefs are an important part of *who we are*, such that to have them ignored, caricatured, disregarded or the like is to feel ignored, caricatured or disregarded ourselves. Accordingly, part of the radical love to which Christ calls us is a consistent exercise, in our interactions with others, of intellectual virtues such as fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, honesty, patience and charity.

Fourth, throughout its history, the Christian church has shown a high and appropriate regard for the enterprise of education. Many Christian parents have a strong and active concern for the quality of their children's education. Other Christians regard teaching as their vocation, as an important and meaningful way to live out their Christian faith. To the extent that we share such a concern or calling, we must ask: What exactly *is* a good education? What do we want our children or students to derive from their many years in school? Presumably, we want them to acquire a good deal of knowledge. We also want them to cultivate a range of intellectual skills: we want them to learn to read, write and think proficiently. But it is not difficult to see how a person might receive these things from her education without actually having received a fully satisfactory education. Or a person might leave high school or university with a lot of knowledge and intellectual skills but without actually *caring* about learning and knowledge—without a commitment to pursuing these things in her life beyond school.

Sometimes this missing element is referred to in terms of a “love of learning” or a commitment to being a “lifelong learner.” But these concepts are rarely unpacked or explained. If they were, the value in question would be identified as that of intellectual virtue. An important part of what we want for the education of our children and students is that they develop a deep and abiding love of knowledge: a love that gives rise to curiosity and attentiveness to the world around them; a desire to continue learning about a broad range of subject matters, and to be tenacious and disciplined in this pursuit; a willingness to question their beliefs and the beliefs of others but also to have the courage of their convictions; and an inclination to treat foreign ideas fairly and respectfully. If this is right, then to the extent that we as Christians are, as we should be, concerned with the enterprise of education, we must also cultivate an interest in and understanding of matters of intellectual character and virtue.

Where does this leave us? We have seen, first, that there is a striking lack of familiarity with matters of intellectual character and virtue at the academic and popular levels and, second, that this is something about which Christians should be especially concerned. Fortunately, the lack of scholarly attention to the intellectual virtues has begun to be remedied in recent years with the advent of “virtue epistemology,” which is an approach to epistemology, or the philosophical study of knowledge, that gives a central role to reflection on these traits and their role in a good intellectual life. However, this concern with intellectual virtues has yet to “trickle down” to a nonacademic audience. What is needed, then, is an informed, accessible and engaging account of the intellectual virtues that will help the average reader to understand just what the intellectual virtues *are* and how we might go about *acquiring* them—and, ideally, an account that approaches these issues from a richly and distinctively Christian standpoint.

This need is met perfectly in the present book. Philip Dow has been thinking carefully about the intellectual virtues for years. And he has had extensive experience incorporating a concern with intellectual character and virtue into school curricula and classrooms across the globe. The result is a masterful and deeply insightful treatment of the intellectual virtues, how they are acquired, their role in the intellectual life and their significance from a distinctively Christian standpoint. Dow's writing is accessible, engaging and fun. It is also intellectually astute, historically informed and packed with wonderful illustrations. I have very high hopes for this book. I hope it will begin to open the public's—and especially the church's—imagination in such a way that the notions of intellectual character and virtue will begin to occupy the central role they deserve in our everyday thinking about and assessment of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

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