

# The Mental Virtues

By David Brooks

We all know what makes for good character in soldiers. We've seen the movies about heroes who display courage, loyalty and coolness under fire. But what about somebody who sits in front of a keyboard all day? Is it possible to display and cultivate character if you are just an information age office jockey, alone with a memo or your computer?

Of course it is. Even if you are alone in your office, you are thinking. Thinking well under a barrage of information may be a different sort of moral challenge than fighting well under a hail of bullets, but it's a character challenge nonetheless.

In their 2007 book, "Intellectual Virtues," Robert C. Roberts of Baylor University and W. Jay Wood of Wheaton College list some of the cerebral virtues. We can all grade ourselves on how good we are at each of them.

First, there is **love of learning**. Some people are just more ardently curious than others, either by cultivation or by nature.

Second, there is **courage**. The obvious form of intellectual courage is the willingness to hold unpopular views. But the subtler form is knowing how much risk to take in jumping to conclusions. The reckless thinker takes a few pieces of information and leaps to some faraway conspiracy theory. The perfectionist, on the other hand, is unwilling to put anything out there except under ideal conditions for fear that she could be wrong. Intellectual courage is self-regulation, Roberts and Wood argue, knowing when to be daring and when to be cautious. The philosopher Thomas Kuhn pointed out that scientists often simply ignore facts that don't fit with their existing paradigms, but an intellectually courageous person is willing to look at things that are surprisingly hard to look at.

Third, there is **firmness**. You don't want to be a person who surrenders his beliefs at the slightest whiff of opposition. On the other hand, you don't want to hold dogmatically to a belief against all evidence. The median point between flaccidity and rigidity is the virtue of firmness. The firm believer can build a steady worldview on solid timbers but still delight in new information. She can gracefully adjust the strength of her conviction to the strength of the evidence. Firmness is a quality of mental agility.

Fourth, there is **humility**, which is not letting your own desire for status get in the way of accuracy. The humble person fights against vanity and self-importance. He's not writing those sentences people write to make themselves seem smart; he's not thinking of himself much at all. The humble researcher doesn't become arrogant toward his subject, assuming he has mastered it. Such a person is open to learning from anyone at any stage in life.

Fifth, there is **autonomy**. You don't want to be a person who slavishly adopts whatever opinion your teacher or some author gives you. On the other hand, you don't want to reject all guidance from people who know what they are talking about. Autonomy is the median of knowing when to bow to authority and when not to, when to follow a role model and when not to, when to adhere to tradition and when not to.

Finally, there is **generosity**. This virtue starts with the willingness to share knowledge and give others credit. But it also means hearing others as they would like to be heard, looking for what each person has to teach and not looking to triumphantly pounce upon their errors. We all probably excel at some of these virtues and are deficient in others. But I'm struck by how much of the mainstream literature on decision-making treats the mind as some disembodied organ that can be programed like a computer.

In fact, the mind is embedded in human nature, and very often thinking well means pushing against the grain of our nature — against vanity, against laziness, against the desire for certainty, against the desire to avoid painful truths. Good thinking isn't just adopting the right technique. It's a moral enterprise and requires good character, the ability to go against our lesser impulses for the sake of our higher ones.

Montaigne once wrote that "We can be knowledgeable with other men's knowledge, but we can't be wise with other men's wisdom." That's because wisdom isn't a body of information. It's the moral quality of knowing how to handle your own limitations. Warren Buffett made a similar point in his own sphere, "Investing is not a game where the guy with the 160 I.Q. beats the guy with the 130 I.Q. Once you have ordinary intelligence, what you need is the temperament to control the urges that get other people into trouble."

Character tests are pervasive even in modern everyday life. It's possible to be heroic if you're just sitting alone in your office. It just doesn't make for a good movie.

Source; [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/opinion/david-brooks-the-mental-virtues.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias:r,{%221%22:%22RI:7%22}&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/opinion/david-brooks-the-mental-virtues.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias:r,{%221%22:%22RI:7%22}&_r=1)