Nathan L. King, THE EXCELLENT MIND: INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

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Of course, it isn’t a great book for everyone. I don’t recommend it for a Yankee gift swap, even a departmental one. If you’re not at least somewhat familiar with contemporary work in the philosophy of logic, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion, it may not be a great book for you. But I am familiar with those things and this was a great book for me. I devoured it, digested it, disagreed with it, and delighted in it. If you’re like me, this will be a great book for you too.

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In The Excellent Mind: Intellectual Virtues for Everyday Life, philosopher Nathan King provides an introduction to the intellectual virtues. The book is well-organized and thorough, and it is marked by King’s characteristic clarity of writing. The Excellent Mind is a welcome text on the intellectual virtues, which are under-represented in the virtue theory literature. This book would be an asset in the philosophy classroom. Moreover, with topics such as echo chambers (206), intellectual gluttony (a vice of excess with respect to curiosity (42)), and fair-mindedness (230), this book is a timely, important resource beyond the academy and in the public square. In what follows, I outline the basic structure and arguments of the book, flagging significant passages and the questions they raise.

The Excellent Mind is divided into three sections: In Part I, King describes what the intellectual virtues are and motivates their importance. Part II examines particular virtues. Part III offers guidance about how to grow in intellectual virtues.

Part I. King begins by explaining why intellectual virtues matter and for whom they matter. He describes his own interest in the intellectual virtues as being rooted in a desire not to “produce a bunch of intellectual mercenaries”—students for whom knowledge retention is a means to pass tests and earn credentials, but who leave unchanged by the process of learning (x). King describes education as a formative, rather than merely informative, process by which students become better thinkers.
Acquiring intellectual virtues can help us to think well—becoming adept at acquiring knowledge, understanding what is important, and communicating effectively. Additionally, intellectual virtues position us to be better community members (29). For example, attentiveness can assist a person in being a loving spouse. Intellectual humility positions us to be more teachable. Carefulness can help us to be better employees (9).

In Part I, King also assesses what intellectual virtues are. He defines them as character traits that generally have three components—(i) a thinking component, in conceiving of knowledge as valuable, (ii) a motivational component, or a desire for true beliefs, and (iii) a behavioral component, or acting to gain, keep, and share truth, knowledge, and understanding (21–22).

In this section, King distinguishes intellectual virtues from moral virtues primarily in terms of their aims. Intellectual virtues aim at truth, knowledge, and understanding (epistemic goods), whereas moral virtues aim at non-epistemic goods, such as kindness and the reduction of pain. King also draws on Aristotle’s explanation of a moral virtue mean to describe intellectual virtues. Intellectual virtues are excellences often positioned between two vices—a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency (22–25). For example, carefulness is an excellence with respect to reasoning from evidence. Its vice of deficiency is carelessness and its vice of excess is scrupulousness. A second example is intellectual courage. This is an excellence with respect to persisting despite threats. Its vice of deficiency is intellectual cowardice and its vice of excess is intellectual rashness. There are exceptions to this pattern of defining intellectual virtues with respect to the mean. For example, there is no vice of excess for fair-mindedness (240). The excess of fair-mindedness is the virtue of intellectual charity. But this pattern holds for intellectual virtues in general.

This raised a question for me about the potentially conflicting orientations of moral and intellectual virtues. Intellectual and moral virtues are generally described as working in tandem, or as offering mutual support in the good life, which King points out (9, 23). However, intellectual virtues are described here as having their own motivational profile—a desire for truth. This leads me to wonder whether the motivations of intellectual virtues might compete with those of moral virtues. Are moral and epistemic goods ever at odds in the good life? If so, to which goods do we have a higher allegiance? And, in moments when both an intellectual and moral virtue inform our actions (such as when attentiveness helps us be more loving, or when our love helps us to be more attentive), which motivational profile has primacy in directing our actions?

The Excellent Mind is focused on intellectual virtues in particular, so it does not answer these questions about interactions with moral virtues. But I think these questions need to be answered to clarify the role intellectual virtues play in the good life.

Part II. In Part Two, King examines specific virtues, such as curiosity, honesty, and intellectual courage. This is the biggest section of the book. King explains each virtue and its associated vices. King also uses stories,
empirical work, and real-world examples to illustrate why these virtues matter. The stories are captivating and generate questions and the descriptions of the virtues are thorough and clear. Furthermore, each chapter ends with discussion questions to help students take ownership of the virtue concepts represented.

I cannot overstate how valuable this material is, from both teaching and self-examination perspectives. There are fun moments, such as the section which expands on Harry Frankfurt’s distinction between lying and bullshitting (136–139). There are motivating moments, including when King describes J.K. Rowling’s perseverance in the face of a long series of publishing failures before she achieved great success (161–162). And there are edifying moments, such as opportunities for readers to reflect on how they might go beyond intellectual fairness, or “avoiding unfair intellectual practices,” to act in terms of intellectual charity—going “out of our way to foster others’ intellectual flourishing” (241–242).

A strength of Part II was the section on the virtue of firmness—an excellence with respect to maintaining one’s perspective (214). King describes how it involves a certain degree of stability—being receptive to new ideas, rather than closed off, yet holding firm to one’s view. He names spinelessness and rigidity as its two vices. An interesting point King makes in this section is to describe a way in which spinelessness and dogmatism are similar. While it seems that “refusing to take new ideas seriously” and “taking seriously every new idea” have nothing in common (215), both vices lead a person to ignore evidence to their detriment. A spineless person prioritizes indirect evidence, ignoring direct evidence. A dogmatic person prioritizes direct evidence, ignoring indirect evidence. Both have faulty reasoning processes because of the evidence they ignore (215–219).

Two other memorable sections in Part II were as follows. First, King makes a connection between skepticism, or suspending judgment, and scrupulousness—the vice of excess with respect to reasoning from evidence. He cautions readers that “skepticism in itself isn’t a virtue” and that perpetually suspending judgment in an attempt to avoid falsehoods positions us to miss out on truth (69). This raises interesting questions about when, if ever, skepticism is a tenable position. What kinds of evidence suffice, such that—in the face of such evidence—a skeptical position becomes scrupulous? And which, if any, major historical instances of skepticism are actually just manifestations of vice?

A second section of note is when King briefly describes wisdom (162–166). He characterizes wisdom as being attentive to whether we are contributing something of value, as well as to the probability of success of intellectual undertakings. Furthermore, King describes how a wise inquirer “considers not only which intellectually valuable projects she can undertake; she also considers what other inquirers are doing, and what work she is uniquely suited to do” (164).

This is an interesting characterization of wisdom. First, thinking about what has value sounds like sophia, not phronesis. But thinking practically
about the probability of success sounds more like *phronesis* than *sophia*. Second, in the classical tradition, wisdom (*sophia*) seems somewhat asocial or non-political, and aloof or godlike, due to the role it plays in the contemplative life. But, here, wisdom is described as attentive to social context—as helping someone to recognize her role within an intellectual community. It involves considering one’s own vocation and talent within the context of the community. Interestingly, toward the end of this section on wisdom, King switches to the words “practical wisdom” (165), so it seems he is combining *sophia* and *phronesis*. This section is brief and is pocketed within a longer section on the virtue of perseverance, and it is an important section for the considerations that are raised about which projects are worth undertaking. Still, I wished for greater clarity between these terms.

**Part III.** Part Three is entitled “Putting on Virtue.” Early in the book, King quotes Aristotle as saying, “We are inquiring not [just] in order to know what excellence is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use” (29; *Nicomachean Ethics* II.2.1743). King states his intention is to help us develop the virtues, rather than simply learn about them (29). Throughout the book, he delivers on this promise—offering direct instruction, opportunities for self-examination, empirical insights, and stories. In Part III, King provides a more focused discussion of virtue development. This is the shortest of the three sections, but it is no less rich. There are great insights about how to grow in virtue.

King describes a plan for virtue development as involving (1) understanding intellectual virtue, (2) an accurate assessment of one’s intellectual character, and (3) a plan for acquiring the virtues we lack. He describes how important it is to have a vision of a flourishing intellectual life (and the qualities that constitute it, such as humility, autonomy, and carefulness) and to understand where we currently stand with respect to this vision, in order to motivate growth.

This raises two questions. First, what, specifically, must we know about intellectual virtues in order to acquire them, and what form should this knowledge take? For example, on some accounts of moral virtue it is sufficient to have a *de re* recognition of virtues as good and to intentionally act in terms of them. On more stringent accounts, we need to meet an articulacy requirement of virtue—being able to articulate what it is that makes an action a good one. I wonder whether King is aligned with the former or the latter position. Based on King’s explanation of direct instruction in development, acquiring a “vocabulary or conceptual framework” of virtues is—if not a necessary condition of acquiring virtues—certainly a success condition for doing so (260–61). Second, developing intellectual virtues seems to involve a puzzle: a learner must be sufficiently honest about her character in order to motivate change, yet honesty is one of the virtues she will need to acquire. Because many of the intellectual virtues named are qualities that make a person teachable and receptive to growth (humility, honesty, curiosity, and open-mindedness), there is a problem of beginnings. Getting started on the path to virtue seems difficult.
In this section, King discusses the differences among incontinence, continence, and virtue. He describes the importance of having suitable motivations in place for virtuous actions. He also emphasizes the means by which we can grow in virtue—namely, emulating exemplars, finding friends who can hold us accountable, and practicing the virtues. He provides recommendations for practicing specific virtues—such as embracing daunting intellectual tasks to grow perseverance and reading articles from opposing viewpoints to develop open-mindedness. Like every other chapter in the book, this one ends with an opportunity for reflection and discussion.

The Excellent Mind is an excellent book. It is wide-ranging, comprehensive, and generates important questions. It also fills a need in the virtue theory literature for an accessible introduction to intellectual virtues. I recommend this book for academics and non-academics alike. I also applaud King for producing a thoughtfully written, thorough resource that models carefulness, fair-mindedness, and other virtues he describes in the book.


C. A. MCINTOSH

Colin Ruloff and Peter Horban have assembled a wide range of theistic arguments in this recent volume of eighteen chapters, seven “revisiting classical arguments for the existence of God,” and eleven on “further directions in natural theology.” The former group begins with two cosmological arguments. First, Joshua Rasmussen defends a modal contingency argument based on the principle that for any fact F, if an explanation of F is possible, then an explanation of F is expectable, other things being equal. Apply the principle: every contingent state possibly has some external explanation. But that’s false if no necessary being is possible. An infinite chain of contingent states explaining other contingent states would itself be a contingent state lacking external explanation, which contradicts the original principle. So, a necessary being is possible. So, there is a necessary being. I wonder, though: if Rasmussen’s argument succeeds, God’s existence is a fact. Is an explanation of God’s existence possible? I suspect Rasmussen thinks not. God’s existence is a brute, unexplained fact. But this needs argument. Not a few theists of some repute have maintained