
INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, when I consider what tremendous consequences come from little things, . . . I am tempted to think . . . that there are no little things.

BRUCE BARTON, QUOTED IN *THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE*

IN 1521, A DEVOUT CATHOLIC PRIEST RISKED HIS LIFE because of his allegiance to the truth. Armed with little more than the strength of his convictions and a habit of courageous thinking, Martin Luther stood before some of the most powerful men in the world and refused to recant his beliefs, stating, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, . . . I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. So help me God."¹

Less than a hundred years later, an impoverished young math teacher, fueled by a desire to understand God's universe, began to carefully investigate claims about the cosmos that contradicted the conclusions of much of the scientific community—not to mention the current religious orthodoxy, common sense and two thousand years of tradition. Johannes Kepler's spiritually inspired willingness to consider the evidence fairly and carefully led him to the

conclusion that the earth was not the center of the solar system but, in fact, revolved elliptically around the sun.² This breakthrough, and others by the young Lutheran mathematician, provided the foundation for Newton's theory of gravity and a host of additional scientific discoveries and unleashed untold numbers of inventions and advances that have transformed our lives for the better.

Yet another 150 years later a small and sickly British parliamentarian, convinced that God had created all people in his image, helped initiate a campaign to end slavery that would last almost fifty years and put him regularly at odds with some of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the British Empire. Dismissed and ridiculed as a religious enthusiast, William Wilberforce responded by earnestly applying his mind to the issue. He read everything there was to read on slavery, actively sought out former slaves and other firsthand witnesses of the trade, and carefully evaluated the mounting body of circumstantial evidence he had accumulated. So thoroughly did he come to understand the issue that, without the aid of notes, Wilberforce regularly produced before parliament rigorously detailed and carefully reasoned speeches lasting for hours at a time. In an age when oratory was judged by substance as well as style, Wilberforce's arguments against slavery were considered unsurpassed. If the young parliamentarian's strength was an honest and careful mind, his thinking was no less tenacious, for it took twenty years of constant labor before the first real breakthrough occurred and another twenty-six years, just three days prior to his death in 1833, before the practice of slavery was entirely abolished in the British Empire.³

Each of these men risked his life, overcame tremendous odds and battled through deep personal disappointments because he believed that pursuing the truth was inseparable from his Christian faith. They all believed their minds were a sacred gift, to be developed and used in the service of their neighbor and to the glory

of God. Posterity remembers these men, and we admire them, not because of a single virtuous thought or act but because their passion for the truth had, over time, produced in them a set of admirable thinking habits—habits that led them to the wise insights, breathtaking discoveries and cultural reforms that transformed their lives, the lives of those around them and, ultimately, the course of history itself.

Casting our eyes about our communities today, we might be forgiven for asking where all the Luthers, Keplers and Wilberforces have gone. It is not as though breakthroughs have ceased to occur or that moral reformers have disappeared, but when we honestly evaluate the thinking habits of our culture, the dominant impression we get is not a pleasant one. Whether it is in the slippery words and deeds of our politicians, the ethical vacuum that is our popular media, or the deceptive advertising and marketing strategies employed by our businesses, instead of thinking that is honest, careful, courageous and fair-minded, what we find is rampant dishonesty, carelessness, cowardice and bias.

Of course, we are not shocked by the deceit of our political and cultural leaders, and why should we be? The newspaper headlines are only the natural outcome of the same cancer that we see eating away at our local communities, families and individual lives. It seems that in our communities the allegiance to the truth often appears to end where self-interest or the pursuit of pleasure begins. Recent polls, for instance, indicate that almost two-thirds of American students cheat on exams—a form of intellectual deceit that all too easily spills over into our relationships, as evidenced in other studies that suggest that as many as half of Americans will cheat on their partners.⁴ It is easy enough to point an accusing finger at anonymous statistics like these, but when we take a brutally honest look at our own lives, we see the same dynamics at work. We may not cook the books or lie under

oath, but our thinking habits reflect the same patterns we condemn in our leaders. The consequences may not seem as dramatic, but the subtle habits of deception that we nurture out of the glare of the public spotlight nevertheless carry consequences that are just as painful.

There are all kinds of reasons for this apparently widespread loss of virtue, but at its core the crisis is rooted in our thinking habits. By that I don't mean that we have somehow become less intelligent, or even that our education system is falling apart. The problem is deeper than that. The crisis is at the very center. It is a crisis of what some are now calling "intellectual character."⁵

What is intellectual character? When we think of character, we usually think of moral character—that is, we think of moral habits that have been repeated so often that they have become inseparable from who we are. Our intellectual character influences our lives just as moral character does, and with at least as much force. The only difference is that intellectual character is concerned not with our actions as much as it is with the thinking habits we are developing as we seek and use knowledge. Put another way, intellectual character is the force of accumulated thinking habits that shape and color every decision we make. Because our minds tend to lead our actions, in a very real sense the quality of our intellectual character even trumps moral character in terms of its power to direct the course of our lives. Take a minute to consider the influence of intellectual character on our decision-making process.

We tend to think of our choices as isolated moments of decision in which we reason through the pros and cons before making the best choice we can based on the information that we have. In reality, most of the choices we make are not the result of conscious and deliberate reasoning. Whether it is a product of the flood of mental distractions and the frenetic busyness of our modern lives or simply exhaustion, we end up making most of our choices on

mental autopilot. We don't reason so much as react, and in this haste we are usually forced to rely on the mental ruts our thinking patterns have produced. These mental ruts are our intellectual character. If we have trained our minds in the direction of good thinking habits, our mental autopilots will generally produce good choices, and good choices generally produce good outcomes. If we have not actively sought to develop the character of our minds, then the prognosis is less encouraging. If these little decisions never amounted to much, it wouldn't really matter, but the problem is that in the accumulation of these little choices the trajectory of our lives is set. In other words, the quality of our mental autopilots matters a great deal.

But our intellectual character does not just influence the multitude of small, everyday choices that fly under our mental radar. Whether we were aware of it or not, the big decisions that command our attention in a much more deliberate way are equally shaped by the thinking patterns we have developed over the years. Let's say I am deciding whether to buy my first house. Over the years, if I had not been practicing virtuous thinking habits such as tenacity (a determination to keep after an idea until I have understood it), carefulness (an insistence on ensuring that important details are not missed) or courage (a willingness to ask questions even when it betrays my ignorance and injures my pride), I would walk into the real estate office with none of the information or intellectual tools I would need to make a wise decision. At that moment I could commit myself to thinking as hard as I possibly could, but the intellectual capital just wouldn't be there. In that way, 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 bank. 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.⁶

The power of intellectual character to transform every part of our lives should not come as a surprise to Christians. When Paul was urging the believers in Rome toward radical Christian transformation, he said that if they really wanted to be different, if they wanted to stand out as models of Christlikeness, then they needed to start with the renewing of their minds. And why? Because Paul understood that, for good or ill, the habits of our minds trickle down into every part of our lives—from our spiritual lives to our marriages and from our jobs to our recreation. It was because of this that the writer of Proverbs pleaded, “Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Cherish her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you” (Proverbs 4:7-8).

The purpose of this small book is to help explain what intellectual character is, why it is so important and how we can become people of “virtuous intellectual character.” To do this we will explore seven of the most important intellectual character traits: courage, tenacity, carefulness, curiosity, fair-mindedness, honesty and humility. After considering the many benefits to our lives that accompany intellectual character, we will wrap things up with some practical suggestions of how we can nurture good thinking habits in our own lives and in the lives of our children and our communities.

The development of intellectual character is one of the most important and life-changing quests anyone can embark on. But as the very heart of Jesus’ command is to love God with all our minds, the pursuit of intellectual character is particularly important to Christians. Yet, whether you are already a Christian or someone interested in becoming one, it is my hope that this book will encourage you to take up the challenge of becoming transformed by the renewing of your mind.⁷