

Book Review

Bivens-Tatum, Wayne. (2022). *Virtue Information Literacy: Flourishing in an Age of Information Anarchy*. Library Juice Press. 262pp. ISBN 978-1-63400-141-0. <http://litwinbooks.com>

In a world of AI-generated content, unprecedented world events, endless scrolling, innumerable sources to check and refresh . . . how can we determine what information to trust?

This isn't a new question to those of us in LIS – or, by now, perhaps pretty much anyone. In my own work, I have been finding promise in the philosophical traditions of virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. These approaches provide guidance for improving our thinking and reasoning, both individually and collectively, rather than attempting to say once and for all what counts as information or what is true. This guidance centers on the development of virtues, such as intellectual humility and intellectual courage.

No surprise, then, that I find *Virtue Information Literacy*, by Wayne Bivens-Tatum, to be a welcome contribution to the conversation. In this book, Bivens-Tatum applies virtue epistemology to information literacy. Put differently, he is exploring the ethical aspects of information literacy. As he writes, “Information literacy has an inherently ethical orientation. It’s not just about ‘evaluating sources’ or learning to do some fact-checking. Learning to engage information effectively involves learning to engage other people and other points of view” (p. 151). Bivens-Tatum is a suitable author to explore these ideas, as he is a practicing academic librarian with many years of experience working on the philosophical issues at play here as well as his work serving students.

The primary purpose of this book is to present *Virtue Information Literacy*, a conceptualization of information literacy that draws on virtue epistemology. While this topic may appeal to a broad range of readers, those who will most appreciate this book are academic librarians and teachers who are interested in philosophy and the history of ideas. For those interested more in application, Bivens-Tatum’s (2021) journal article “Scholarly Conversations, Intellectual Virtues, and *Virtue Information Literacy*” will likely be enough.

This short book is organized into eight chapters that build on each other in the style of an extended philosophical essay. Chapter 1 provides a terminological orientation to information literacy, virtue ethics, virtue epistemology, and thus *Virtue Information Literacy*. Chapter 2 addresses a prominent critique of virtue-based approaches, dubbed situationism, through a discussion of the science of habit and extended cognition. Chapter 3 focuses on scholarly conversation (one of the threshold concepts in the

ACRL information literacy framework) as requiring intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness and intellectual courtesy. Chapter 4 then takes something of a detour, investigating the notion of selfhood and problems thinking about selves atomistically, preparing the reader for Chapter 5, which conceptualizes the scholarly self, i.e., a self who exhibits intellectual virtues to take part in scholarly conversations. Chapter 6 takes another detour, arguing that librarians are not in the business of truth. The final two chapters discuss two concepts that Bivens-Tatum contributes to the scholarly conversation of information literacy. Chapter 7 explains the virtue of information vigilance, a kind of slow-thinking, mindful awareness of an information space. And finally, Chapter 8 discusses the concept of information asceticism, which is a way of being through which the intellectual virtues are developed – and also serves as a mode of resisting dominant social forces and ultimately flourishing as a person.

As may be evident by my chapter summaries, this book exhibits strong philosophical and historical grounding for each topic under discussion. This may be a positive, particularly in a world where frameworks are developed without much to support them. At times, however, the discussion feels digressive. For example, in the book we find lengthy histories of asceticism, mindfulness, selfhood, etc. These sections are meant to survey the scholarship in the ambit of particular concepts raised in this book, but they sometimes strike me as a little too tangential. Then – perhaps oddly, given the length in some tangential areas – certain issues are glossed over, such as definitions of particular virtues and strategies for measuring virtue, both of which comprise sizable literatures in philosophy and psychology. For applied work such as this, I would think these are topics to consider in more depth.

The largest question I am left with after reading this book is how librarians and teachers can best help our students cultivate the intellectual virtues. In this book, Bivens-Tatum suggests they (and we) can do this by (1) meditating, (2) being in a library or some other virtuous environment, and (3) by trying. There are interesting discussions in *Virtue Information Literacy* on each of these points, but I fear that they will only bring us so far. I would have appreciated further guidance, perhaps tried and tested through years as a librarian and teacher. For the interested reader, two existing sources that begin to gesture in the direction of cultivating virtue include: *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Zagzebski, 2017), which theorizes that we learn the virtues by observing virtuous people in our environment; and *Technology and the Virtues* (Vallor, 2016), which among other things provides a seven-part framework for developing virtue.

All in all, *Virtue Information Literacy* is a worthwhile book that can serve as an introduction to the applications of virtue epistemology. It's part of a suite of related efforts at the intersection of LIS and contemplation (Latham et al., 2020), including *Slow Information* (Poirier & Robinson, 2014) and *mindfulness* (Ussery, 2021). I hope that this book will also spark further work in this area, helping us approach today's wicked problems of trust and cognitive authority.

Tim Gorichanaz
Drexel University
gorichanaz@drexel.edu

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