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Scholarly Conversations, Intellectual Virtues, and Virtue Information Literacy

Wayne Bivens-Tatum

Abstract

This article develops a concept of Virtue Information Literacy (VIL) modeled on the philosophical subfields of virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. VIL is an ethical, character-based approach analyzing information literacy through intellectual virtues and vices in order to cultivate such virtues with the goal of living a more flourishing life. The article explains the foundation of VIL in virtue ethics and virtue epistemology; analyzes recent work making similar connections between information literacy, virtue epistemology, and intellectual virtues and vices; and finally with the aid of Richard Rorty's pragmatism and Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics analyzes some intellectual virtues especially useful for "Scholarship as Conversation," including open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual courtesy, and intellectual thoroughness.

Introduction

Is it better to be an information literate person than not? If so, then one of the many things librarians try to do is educate themselves and their students to be better people in this particular way. And what might it even mean to be an information literate person? Partly, or so I argue below, being an information literate person involves having certain intellectual virtues that make it more likely than not that you will be successful in library research, scholarly inquiry, information evaluation, and any of the other tasks that we might classify as part of information literacy, because information literacy involves exercising practical wisdom in information-seeking situations and contributes to human flourishing and a well-lived life. I pay special attention to the intellectual virtues requisite for successful "scholarly conversations," and

consider such virtues to be information virtues as well as intellectual virtues, and I shall call the ethical, character-based approach to information literacy highlighting these virtues Virtue Information Literacy (VIL).

Virtue Ethics and Virtue Epistemology

My concept of Virtue Information Literacy (VIL) is modeled on virtue ethics and especially virtue epistemology. Before examining the Weak Autonomous Virtue Epistemology that has most influence my approach, I shall briefly explain the significance of the "virtue" modifier in relation to ethics and epistemology and now information literacy. "Virtue" in these cases is often a translation of the ancient Greek word *aretē* (ἀρετή), which can also be translated as "excellence." A virtue is thus an excellence of some kind rooted in a person's character, a moral excellence in the case of virtue ethics and an intellectual excellence in the case of virtue epistemology. In the case of VIL, I will also speak of information virtues or excellences. Thus, information virtues are those character traits that will help people be more information literate than they otherwise would be.

Virtue ethics contrasts with the two dominant ways of thinking about ethics in modern philosophy: consequentialism and deontology. Consequentialist ethical approaches such as utilitarianism argue that we should evaluate actions based on their consequences. Utilitarianism, for example, usually posits some variation of "the greatest good for the greatest number" as a standard for evaluation. Deontological ethics evaluates actions based on whether they adhere to some standard of duty or the right thing to do. Familiar examples might include the Ten Commandments, the Buddhist precepts, and Kant's categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1993, 30). For both approaches, the locus of evaluation is the actions of persons rather

than the character of persons. We are ethical if we "use our resources to help others the most" as the recent "effective altruism" movement requires, or if we fulfill our duty according to some rule for appropriate action, whether based in religion, philosophy, or politics.

Instead of consequences or duties, virtue ethics approaches ethical actions by asking what sort of person we should be, and answers that question by developing a list of character virtues that humans should acquire through education and training. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*—a core text for virtue ethics—examines the traditional list of classical virtues such as courage, moderation, prudence or practical wisdom, and justice. (Aristotle 2014, Bks 3-5). Christians add what are sometimes called the "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and charity. While it may be useful to analyze ethical actions based on their consequences or their adherence to an appropriate code of ethics, virtue ethicists think about what sort of character traits we should have in order to act ethically in the world, and furthermore why and how we should develop such character traits. The goal of classical virtue ethics is *eudaimonia*, usually translated as "happiness" but with a broader meaning of a well-lived, flourishing life. Virtue ethicists argue, for example, that being the sort of person who is courageous or just and who especially has cultivated the practical wisdom to act courageously or justly in particular circumstances will help us live such a eudaimonic life.

Where virtue ethics focuses on moral virtues and their relationship to living a eudaimonic life, virtue epistemology extends that focus to epistemology (the theory of knowledge). Virtue epistemologists ask what intellectual virtues would make it more likely for us to attain knowledge, which will in turn make us more likely to live well. In Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle examines the virtues of good deliberation or comprehension as components of the practically wise person. Other intellectual virtues analyzed in the literature

include love of knowledge, curiosity, intellectual humility, intellectual autonomy, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual perseverance. Virtue epistemology subdivides into reliabilist and responsibilist versions. Reliabilist virtue epistemology focuses on intellectual virtues that make it more likely the knowledge we attain is reliable and includes virtues largely out of our control such as perception, memory, or sheer cognitive ability. People with naturally excellent memories or cognitive processing skills are more likely to attain reliable knowledge than people with poor skills, but while some such skills can be cultivated, these are possibly more reliant upon nature than nurture. Responsibilist virtue epistemology focuses on intellectual virtues that might not guarantee our knowledge is reliable, but do make it more likely that, if practiced, our inquiry will lead to knowledge more successfully than otherwise, and that furthermore these virtues can be developed through education, training, and self-cultivation. We might not be able to do much about whether we are naturally intellectually brilliant, but we can cultivate open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and perseverance once we know what they are and understand their value for inquiry and knowledge acquisition.

Along these lines, virtue information literacy focuses on intellectual or information virtues that we can cultivate in ourselves and our students and that make it more likely, if practiced, for us to attain greater information literacy, with the assumption that information literacy in relevant contexts makes it more likely that our inquiries—particularly our scholarly inquiries—will more likely lead to knowledge than otherwise, and that the ability to act in information literate ways will help us lead more flourishing lives. That is a lot to ask of a typical one-shot library instruction class, but information literacy concerns the entire educational endeavor, not just the typical scope and actions of librarians. Hopefully, VIL can also help us understand some common scholarly and IL behaviors and problems in new and useful ways.

As an aside, although I use the word *knowledge*, I should note that librarians are in the information business, not the knowledge or truth business, and we need not have theories of knowledge or truth to consider my version of VIL. Debates within epistemology about whether knowledge is justified true belief (the traditional philosophical definition) have little relevance to whether someone is more likely to attain knowledge through appropriate information behaviors than otherwise. For my purposes, I have in mind a minimal pragmatist conception of knowledge as justified belief acquired through inquiry, with the modes of inquiry and standards of justification relative to the epistemic communities we inhabit and the types of claims we want to make. This view of knowledge is rooted in scholarly conversations. Typically, for scholarly epistemic communities justification will consist of some combination of evidence, analysis, and argument, with what counts as evidence determined by more specific epistemic subcommunities, from the quantitative empirical research employed by the sciences to the textual analysis and interpretation employed by the humanities generally to "the development and explication of fundamental concepts" through "conceptual analysis, historical critique, and creative redescription" often employed by philosophical approaches (and which I engage in here) (Gutting 1999, 193).

As with my own rejection of any need to define knowledge for VIL, virtue epistemologists do not necessarily need "to formulate a definition of knowledge or an account of justification" to consider "the character of the intellectual life in a way that can actually help people live that life" (Roberts and Wood 2007, 28). In *Intellectual Virtues: an Essay in Regulative Epistemology*, Robert Roberts and Jay Wood specifically argue against the necessity of such an account of knowledge or justification in order to bring "legitimate epistemic desiderata…together in one conception—that of the excellent epistemic agent, the person of

intellectual virtues." They "propose that in general a human virtue is an acquired base of excellent functioning in some generically human sphere of activity that is challenging and important" and that "intellectual virtues… are simply acquired bases of excellent intellectual functioning," "dispositions to use our epistemic faculties well—in the excellent pursuit of the goods internal to cognitive practices" (Roberts and Wood 2007, 42). They analyze in detail the intellectual virtues of love of knowledge, firmness, courage and caution, humility, autonomy, generosity, and practical wisdom in order to provide guidance (or regulation) for those who desire to cultivate intellectual virtues and a flourishing intellectual life, and include analyses of such intellectual practices as reading, public debate, and teaching that benefit from the cultivation of intellectual virtues. Librarians could add common library research-related practices including searching for and engaging in scholarly conversations, which I treat in more depth below.

In *The Inquiring Mind*, Jason Baehr also bypasses a definition or theory of knowledge to focus on the actions of inquiry—which involve "observing, imagining, reading, interpreting, reflecting, analyzing, assessing, formulating, and articulating" and the success of which "requires an exercise of certain intellectual character traits" such as "attentive observation, thoughtful or open-minded imagination, patient reflection, careful and thorough analysis, or fair-minded interpretation and assessment" (Baehr 2011, 1). Along with Roberts and Wood, Baehr develops an "autonomous" approach to virtue epistemology "largely independent of traditional [epistemological] questions" rather than trying to answer those questions. This autonomous "approach is 'weak' because it regards an autonomous concern with intellectual virtue as merely *complementing*—not replacing—traditional epistemology" (199). Similarly, my view of virtue information literacy could be construed as a Weak Autonomous VIL, in that I am not attempting

to replace the traditional concerns or answer the traditional questions of information literacy, but instead to provide a complementary character-based, ethical way of viewing information literacy.

To a great extent VIL is an extension of Baehr's project in the domain he labels "applied virtue epistemology," an application I have found particularly fruitful for analyzing information literacy. His analysis suggests "that there are fixed and generic domains of human activity (e.g. journalism, law, science, and education) success in which makes substantial and reasonably systematic demands on a person's intellectual character," and that "these demands would appear to be traceable and worth exploring and understanding from a philosophical standpoint." Questions we might ask of them include:

> What exactly is the (intellectual character-relevant) structure of this domain? What sorts of demands does success in this domain make on a person's intellectual character? Which intellectual virtues are relevant to meeting these demands? And how exactly are they relevant? Are there potential conflicts between the requirements of intellectual virtue and the requirements for success in this domain? If so, how should they be understood and adjudicated? (201)

This essay attempts to answer some of these questions regarding information literacy and library research, particularly within higher education. Baehr goes farther and argues that "*an intellectual virtue is a character trait that contributes to its possessor's personal intellectual worth on account of its involving a positive psychological orientation toward epistemic goods*" (102). While I might believe that possessing information virtues and being information literate in relevant contexts do increase one's intellectual worth, my conception of VIL does not require such a belief. It could be that being information literate in relevant contexts makes us better people than we might otherwise be, but my argument here does not depend on that claim.

Information Literacy and Intellectual Vices

Other researchers have linked virtue epistemology with information literacy. One way to highlight the importance of intellectual virtues for information literacy is through analysis of the relationship between information literacy and intellectual vices. In their introduction to a recent special issue of *Postdigital Science and Education* on "Lies, Bullshit and Fake News," Alison MacKenzie and Ibrar Bhatt hint at the connection (MacKenzie and Bhatt 2020). They refer to a short analysis by Quassim Cassam on the usefulness of "vice epistemology" when trying to explain the rise of fake news, including such vices as "closed-mindedness, arrogance, prejudice, dogmatism, overconfidence, and wishful thinking"(Cassam n.d.). (In a longer treatment, Cassam adds vices such as carelessness and gullibility (Cassam 2016, 159)). They pay particular attention to the vice of epistemic arrogance, which I address below.

An article in that special issue by Jennifer Rose addresses epistemic issues related to "fake news." Without specifically mentioning virtue epistemology or information literacy, Rose shows VIL in practice and provides a succinct analysis of the epistemic concerns around "fake news" and how educators might "help knowers understand the limits of their epistemological stances in relation to fake news in online environments through enhancing critical thinking pedagogical strategies that seek to combat fake news" (Rose 2020, 215). After detailing specific problems of knowledge related to online news, she notes that "even a diligent online news consumer who diligently extends one's epistemic and factchecking capabilities to seek the truth may not be able to overcome the inherent deceit of fake news" (207). Regardless of how much fact-checking we might be able to do, online news—fake or otherwise—often exceeds our ability to verify it. She concludes that education can "help online news consumers understand what they can and cannot know when they encounter an online news story" because "understanding the

requirements of knowing and realizing what one cannot know because of limited access to evidence is…a first step towards reducing one's acceptance of fake news." In addition, education can "help online news consumers understand the limits to the knowledge that they already possess and understand its limits of applicability," because "even if one possesses knowledge and truth, these true justified beliefs may be inadequate for assessing the truth of fake news." (213) She argues persuasively that evaluating online news requires more than fact-checking, that such evaluation benefits from considering intellectual virtues and vices, and that educators should help "students understand their inherent contextual, epistemological constraints on uncovering the truth of fake news" through the cultivation of intellectual humility by "encouraging students to explicate all of their reasons for holding, accepting, or rejecting a belief" (214).

Rose does a good job of explaining how our epistemic limitations complicate the evaluation of online news, but "fake news" can also help explain what I believe to be the intuitive appeal of virtue epistemology and virtue information literacy. She analyzes a fake news article regarding fraudulent pre-marked ballots during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. A more outlandish conspiracy theory (to my mind at least) might better highlight why information literate people feel puzzled by people who believe some fake news stories, so I use Pizzagate instead, a conspiracy theory that claimed leaked emails of Hillary Clinton's campaign manager "contained coded messages that connected several U.S. restaurants and high-ranking officials of the Democratic Party with an alleged human trafficking and child sex ring."("Pizzagate Conspiracy Theory" 2020) One young man sought to fact-check this story by driving from North Carolina to Washington, D.C., entering a pizza restaurant allegedly used in this human trafficking scheme, and firing a rifle on the premises (Kang and Goldman 2016). One might

argue that at least he did not simply accept what he had read online as fact, but a question that arises for me regarding Pizzagate or other highly improbable stories is, why would anyone believe this in the first place?

The fact that anyone could believe some of the more outlandish fake news stories and conspiracy theories puzzles a lot of people, perhaps especially librarians and other educators who are professionally involved in the evaluation of information. This puzzlement can be partly explained through consideration of intellectual virtues and vices, because chalking up such beliefs to human stupidity does not explain much. Indeed, if Michael Shermer is correct, being smart or stupid has nothing to do with it. He argues that "smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons" (Shermer 2002, 283). Information literate people, people trained to evaluate information, might be puzzled by the gullibility of others not because they are so much smarter than gullible people, but because they possess character traits that the gullible do not. They possess intellectual and information virtues cultivated over long practice in evaluating information, in this case particularly a healthy skepticism towards information that emerges in online echo chambers and has not been verified in any concrete way. If they do not outright dismiss such claims, they suspend judgment until sufficient evidence is forthcoming, which in practice is much the same thing. Even someone hostile to Hillary Clinton might reasonably conclude that were she actually involved in a human trafficking ring, nobody would make much of a fuss over her email controversy ("Hillary Clinton Email Controversy" 2020). Information literate people tend to have intellectually internalized the "Sagan standard" that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" ("Sagan Standard" 2020). That Clinton played fast and loose with email

servers seems plausible, that she is a human trafficker not so much, that she is a member of the reptilian elite (*Time* n.d.) beyond the pale, at least for the information literate.

It is difficult, I maintain, for information literate people to understand why some conspiracy theorists can hold such implausible beliefs because the information literate have cultivated intellectual virtues that the conspiracy theorists have not. Information literate people, for example, do not believe an improbable proposition is true because it has not been conclusively disproven, but such belief structures are typical for conspiracy theorists, and indeed for many people engaged in motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoners can be motivated by, for example, "directional outcomes" that involve "reaching specific desired conclusions, such as impressions of themselves as intelligent, caring, and worthy people, or positive beliefs about others whom they find likeable or to whom they are especially close" or nondirectional outcomes such as "such as reaching the most accurate conclusion possible or making a clear and concise decision, whatever this conclusion or decision may be" (Daniel C. Molden and Higgins 2005, 296–97). Our desired outcome affects our ability to search for and evaluate information. Psychological research has shown some evidence, for example, that "people engage in increased evidence evaluations and prolonged information search when encountering evidence unfavorable to their preferred self-views and reduced evidence evaluation and information search when encountering evidence favorable to their preferred self-views " (301–2). If we want to believe that Clinton is a reptilian overlord or child trafficker, we are more likely to believe information that supports that claim. However, if we are motived to be accurate, as information literacy instruction suggests, we also might prolong our information search and evaluation.

Information literate people have trouble understanding why people uncritically believe in Pizzagate and other fake news because our education and training encourage us to instinctually

question its veracity. Information literacy has become a second nature, a part of our intellectual character. We might wonder why people do not either dismiss such fake news or try to verify it using information literacy techniques, but it could be that the information illiterate have neither the training *nor* the disposition to do so. If I am right, it is not just that people lack the skills to verify such information, and Jennifer Rose points out all the problems with trying to verify online information. It is *also* that some people just *do not want to approach information critically*, particularly information that confirms their biases or threatens their worldview. They want to believe, so the belief comes before and resists any evidence. We might all be like this some of the time about some topics, and many critically thoughtful and information literate people might bracket questions of religion or politics, but information illiterate people are like this much of the time, and this puzzles the information literate.

Fake news and conspiracy theories are always with us, but character-based information virtues manifest themselves in more typical academic contexts as well. While school librarians work with children's information literacy and many librarians have recently paid attention to fake news (Batchelor 2017, Rose-Wiles 2018, Barclay 2017)2/22/2021 4:34:00 PM academic librarians perhaps more often work with college students on research assignments, and attending to intellectual vices makes sense of some of these encounters as well. Here I shall describe a recent encounter I had with a student and why I interpreted our interaction through a virtue information literacy lens specifically focused on a significant intellectual vice.

The student met with me at her instructor's request to help her find a "scholarly conversation" for her writing class's research essay. Often I help students navigate scholarly resources to find just such conversations, but that requires them to have actual research questions. Sometimes students believe they have research questions, but what they actually have

are fully formulated thesis statements which they afterwards seek to support by finding scholarly sources that agree with their thesis statement, the first-year-composition version of smart people defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons. In my experience, this often happens because students are using the five-paragraph essay format they successfully employed in high school to write research essays in college, where the format fails. (For those unfamiliar with the format, a five-paragraph essay includes an introductory paragraph with a tripartite thesis statement, three body paragraphs each addressing one of the three parts of the thesis, and a concluding paragraph summarizing the thesis statement and body paragraphs.) There are numerous problems with the format from a college research and writing perspective, but one specific problem for library research purposes is that the format encourages students to come up with thesis statements before they have done any actual research or reading by simply "using their brain," as my student put it, instead of researching a topic with a question in mind and letting their research guide the development of their thesis statement. The backwards construction of proper research this approach encourages leads to what one could call the Five-paragraph Reference Question, which can be broadened to include any library research query that tries to find research to support claims that have been formulated based on nothing but unsupported opinion. Reference librarians probably recall questions like, "can you help me find five scholarly source that support X position?"

Her thesis statement involved, among other things, a claim that a television advertisement sponsored by an insurance company (Durando, n.d.) was unethical because it could make parents feel like it—the advertisement—threatened their children, which on the face of it should seem as implausible as the claim that Hillary Clinton is a shape-shifting reptilian overlord. She had searched in vain for psychology articles that might support this and related claims, and indeed

had found numerous articles reporting empirical psychological studies about the emotional effects of television advertising, so searching databases and finding sources was not a problem. However, the only result of such a search was to question the usefulness of empirical psychology studies. (Given the controversies around p-hacking and replication problems in psychology, one might legitimately question the value of many such studies, but that is another issue.)

What became gradually clear in our long conversation was that the student was both 1) supremely confident in the worthwhileness of her claims and the method she had used to acquire them, and 2) completely unable to defend any of them with evidence or argument because they were completely unrelated to any intellectual or scholarly conversation regarding the topic, or indeed any evidence at all. The five-paragraph-essay mentality helps explain why she was engaging research in a backwards manner, but something else is required to explain this combination of ignorance and epistemic arrogance. Ignorance itself is not an intellectual vice; we are all vastly ignorant and recognizing that is a sign of intellectual maturity. Epistemic arrogance—the belief that you are absolutely correct in your knowledge, that you have a sure grip on the truth and anyone who disagrees with you is simply wrong—is an intellectual vice, and the one Jennifer Rose's preferred virtue of intellectual humility seeks to undermine. However, it is possible for us to be epistemically arrogant and in fact be absolutely correct. But epistemic arrogance combined with ignorance about the relevant topic—which I shall call *ignarrogance* (no relation to the 1998 album by German power noise band Noisex)—might just be the supreme intellectual vice. When Socrates said that he was the wisest man in Greece because he knew that he knew nothing, he exemplified (possibly ironic) intellectual humility, and his frequent challenges to people who claimed knowledge of something (e.g., justice or piety) but who under examination in fact did not know were attempts to identify and eliminate

ignarrogance. Once I realized that the student suffered from ignarrogance, I understood the research consultation better.

My goal then expanded beyond explaining why her research approach was backwards, why she needed to first do the research and reading and then formulate a thesis statement in response to the research. That process does involve intellectual virtues that I shall discuss below. Before that, however, my goal became the Socratic one of identifying and eliminating the intellectual vice of ignarrogance, to get her to change her entire attitude towards knowledge acquisition and scholarship; thus, I reframed the research consultation as intellectual therapy. Although I had not yet read Rose's article, my approach was similar to hers. I pointed out the limitations of our knowledge, that in many cases we do not really know what we think we know, and that *not* to understand the limitations of our ability to know and *not* to show intellectual humility before the vast amount of knowledge we do not have harm us as students and scholars. It is not just that we are worse people in some way—although I think we are—it is that we fail to flourish intellectually as well as we might without such virtues. Also, we make worse grades. We in the academy inhabit some version of what philosopher Wilfrid Sellars called the "logical space of reasons" (Sellars 1963, 169), and scholarly conversations are not monologues designed to propagate our preconceived beliefs, but dialogues to which we must open ourselves and respond with reasons and justification. In our space of reasons and justification, we fare better if we have cultivated relevant intellectual virtues.

Virtue Epistemology and the Framework

Others have begun to apply Baehr's version of virtue epistemology specifically to information literacy. Although concerned with "developing intellectual character in children's online information behaviours" David McMenemy and Steven Buchanan examine the "ACRL

Framework for Information Literacy," typically associated with academic research at the college level. They use "Baehr's framework of nine core virtues: curiosity; intellectual autonomy; intellectual humility; attentiveness; intellectual carefulness; intellectual thoroughness; open-mindedness; intellectual courage; and intellectual tenacity" (McMenemy and Buchanan 2018, 74) from his book *Cultivating Good Minds* (Baehr 2015). Baehr's work is applicable when considering information literacy at any intellectual level, and indeed he "helped found the Intellectual Virtues Academy of Long Beach, a charter middle school in Long Beach, CA" ("About" 2017).

When looking at the Framework from a virtue epistemology perspective, the frequent mention of "dispositions" stands out. The presence of dispositions is, as they note, a "potential indication that the approach taken in the development of the Framework is cognisant of character issues." Although intellectual virtues are not "manifest within" the Framework, their "latent analysis identified several relationships" (McMenemy and Buchanan 2018, 78). As a reminder, the Framework's threshold concepts are: Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information Has Value, Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration (Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) 2015). McMenemy and Buchanan find some of Baehr's core intellectual virtues particularly latent in "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual" (open-mindedness and intellectual carefulness); "Research as Inquiry" (curiosity, intellectual humility, and open-mindedness); and "Scholarship as Conversation" (open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness); with some latent presence within "Searching as Strategic Exploration" (intellectual humility) (78–79). Their analysis is brief and they leave any development of virtue epistemology in relation to information literacy for further research on

such topics as "refining IL education models to explicitly incorporate application of intellectual character virtues," undertaking "empirical studies with children to explore appropriate methods of intellectual character development," and analyzing "current IL education for practitioners to consider how VE concepts can be introduced into the professional body of knowledge" (81).

Intellectual Virtues and Scholarly Conversations

Although I began this project before encountering their article, my work here is directly related to that of McMenemy and Buchanan, and we are all clearly influenced by Jason Baehr's applied virtue epistemology. While McMenemy and Buchanan ranged quickly through the entire ACRL Framework, I would like to explore more deeply some intellectual virtues appropriate to library research with a focus on "scholarly conversations." They find open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness latent within the Framework's threshold concept of "Scholarship as Conversation," but their analysis leaves unanswered why such virtues are important and necessary and how the notion of having a scholarly conversation inherently requires certain intellectual character traits, as I believe to be the case. To attempt answering that question, I will relate the idea of a scholarly conversation to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. A scholarly conversation, or perhaps better a dialogue (with Plato's dialogues as examples), is a discussion among two or more people seeking knowledge and understanding through inquiry.

Earlier, I explained that my concept of knowledge for the purposes of explicating virtue information literacy is deliberately minimal. Jennifer Rose concerns herself with the standard analytical epistemology definition of knowledge as justified true belief, but for information literacy purposes we may simplify that by jettisoning the notion of truth and just looking at justified beliefs. To whom are our beliefs justified? The relevant answer in the context of a

scholarly conversation is: other scholars, those with the highest standards for evidence and justification relevant to our context, and perhaps ultimately the group that Chaim Perlman in a rhetorical context calls the "universal audience" (Perelman et al. 1969, 31–34). This way of viewing knowledge is hardly unique to me. Consider a passage from pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

> If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood. Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification, and from there to the actual changes in those standards which make up intellectual history (Rorty 1979, 389–90).

Elsewhere, he summarizes pragmatism as "the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers" (Rorty 1982, 165).

In Rorty's pragmatism, knowledge and truth emerge out of human communication, where people try to justify themselves to each other based on human standards rather than according to some allegedly more fundamental standard such as God or Objective Reality. The "gap between truth and justification" is simply "the gap between the actual good and the possible better," and "what is rational for us now to believe may not be true, is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea" because "new evidence, or new hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary, may come along" (Rorty 1999a, 23). Like controlled vocabularies, what counts as knowledge and truth even among the best relevant cognitive authorities adapts as we come to

understand the world in new ways, although like controlled vocabularies this adaptation may be slow.

Instead of a final, metaphysically grounded knowledge immune to historical and cultural evolution, pragmatists aim for "as much intersubjective agreement as possible." Rorty argues that the "distinction between knowledge and opinion…is simply the distinction between topics on which such agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get." And since "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – ours – uses in one or another area of inquiry," "we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a *commendatory term for well-justified beliefs*" (Rorty, 1999a). Even Rorty acknowledges that it "may seem strange to say that there is no connection between justification and truth…because we are inclined to say that truth is the aim of inquiry," within a Darwinian worldview some ultimate standard of truth such as "justification before God, or before the tribunal of reason, as opposed to any merely finite human audience" is neither possible nor desirable. In this worldview, "such a tribunal would have to envisage all the alternatives to a given belief, and know everything that was relevant to criticism of every such alternative" (Rorty 1999b, 37). If there is an aim of inquiry and research, it could be a better understanding of whatever it is we are trying to understand, more justifiable beliefs than we hitherto had, but not some ultimate foundation of metaphysical, ahistorical truth. Is this view of knowledge and truth *really* true? Within the context of VIL, such arguments do not matter.

In teaching and learning how to find, evaluate, and use scholarly sources—typical librarian tasks—librarians operate within a pragmatic understanding of knowledge. We ask, what

is an authoritative source, for example, with the understanding that authority is "contextual and constructed." As Amy Hofer, Silvia Lin Hanick, and Lori Townsend nicely expand the concept in their book *Transforming Information Literacy Instruction*, "authority is a form of intellectual trust granted by an individual or community to an information source. It is both constructed, built through expertise and persistent reliability, and contextual, limited to certain knowledge domains or situations and shaped by community norms" (Hofer, Lin Hanick, and Townsend 2019, 58). Thus, "peer-reviewed" does not mean "absolutely correct" but something more like, "meets the intellectual standards of a relevant epistemic community." Because librarians work at the level of scholarly conversations, they do not have to have a theory of knowledge as "grounded" in some allegedly objective reality. And when it comes to teaching students to evaluate information, we do not ultimately decide whether information is true or constitutes knowledge, but more often teach "markers that act as heuristics (rules of thumb)", including "qualifications like degrees, years of experience, reputation, and indications of quality control processes such as editorial and peer review" (59). Librarians don't typically read and evaluate scholarly publications and tell students that "not only is this article published in a high-impact journal by a researcher associated with a top university, but it's also true. I'm a librarian; I should know!"

Olaf Sundin and Jenny Johannisson also apply Rorty's pragmatist view of knowledge to LIS, although for different purposes than mine. (Their article provides a useful succinct discussion of Rorty versus his critics, as does Malachowski 2014, ch.6). They analyze the "concept of communicative participation as an alternative, or complement, to the concept of information seeking" and note that Rorty "argues for intersubjectivity, community and solidarity—concepts which focus on communication and on the importance of justification" (Sundin and Johannisson 2005, 24). This communicative view of knowledge implies that

"justification…can never find ultimate validation or falsification by referent to an independent reality, but is created in interaction between humans…within a specific community of justification" where the "only criteria by which to judge a method is that of judging its usefulness in relation to a particular purpose" (30, 31). Sundin and Johannisson apply this perspective to information-seeking research within LIS, while I borrow this minimal pragmatist conception of knowledge because it helps illuminate the importance of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual thoroughness for the commonly used Framework threshold concept of "Scholarship as Conversation." Scholarly conversation as a metaphor naturally suggests a view of the world where we seek knowledge and understanding within communities of justification, and operating within these communities most successfully requires some intellectual virtues.

To further examine the relationship between conversations, knowledge, and intellectual virtues, I turn to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose influence Rorty acknowledges. (For a very different but interesting use of Gadamer within LIS thought, see Burgess 2016.) Traditionally, hermeneutics is the science of interpreting texts, initially Biblical texts, but Gadamer extends hermeneutics to all questions of human understanding involving language, and for Gadamer "all human knowledge of the world is linguistically mediated" and "all experience takes place in our constant communicative cultural education into our knowledge of the world" (Gadamer 2007, 65). Indeed, as he famously put it in *Truth and Method*, "Being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer 2004, 490).

In traditional hermeneutics, we interpret texts through a recursive encounter between the parts and the whole called the "hermeneutic circle." As Schleiermacher described it, "there is ... an opposition between the unity of the whole and the individual parts of the work, so that the

task could be set in a twofold manner, namely to understand the unity of the whole by the individual parts and the value of the individual parts via the unity of the whole" (quoted in Lawn 2006, 46). Martin Heidegger expanded this part/whole relationship to the entire process of understanding, and it is this conception that Gadamer builds upon. As Gadamer describes Heidegger's expansion of the hermeneutic circle, it is "is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter." We anticipate the meaning of a text, and

> the anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a "methodological" circle [as it might be in traditional hermeneutics], but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding (Gadamer 2004, 305).

Not only do we use the parts of a text to understand the whole, and vice versa, we use part of our own previous beliefs to understand a text while also letting that text affect our beliefs. We do not approach texts without already having formed some judgment about them, but our judgment should change as allow our views to change in response to what we read. This ideally leads to what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons." In phenomenological jargon, everything that might be interpreted has a "horizon" of meaning, a permeable boundary, and within hermeneutics "interpretation is sited within the mutual horizon of the interpreter and the thing to be interpreted" (Lawn 2006, 2). The past and the present, one culture and another, a reader and a

text, all have horizons of meaning that interpretation tries to fuse, and even though such fusion is never complete, for Gadamer "understanding is always the fusion of these horizons" (Gadamer 2004, 317). Similarly, in ordinary English we speak of "expanding our horizons" as a metaphor for broadening our knowledge and understanding of the world outside of our previous narrow experience.

The metaphor of "scholarship as a conversation" plays nicely with the idea that understanding is linguistically mediated, and that our knowledge involves justifying beliefs to other people through dialogue. Scholarly research within libraries is a fine example of our "communicative cultural education." Library research involves searching for texts and using a variety of them to change and improve our understanding of the world. While neither Rorty's conception of knowledge nor Gadamer's conception of understanding satisfy all comers (and Rorty in particular has many vigorous if sometimes intellectually unfair critics), arguably "scholarship as conversation" implies such conceptions.

According to Gadamer, to begin understanding anything from a historical document to a living person's arguments we always bring our prejudices (etymologically, our pre-judgments or our "fore-understandings") with us, but understanding requires opening ourselves up to the views of others in the conversation, for "philosophical hermeneutics concludes that understanding is in fact only possible when one brings one's own presuppositions into play" (Gadamer 2007, 62), and "hermeneutical reflection includes the point that in all understanding of a matter, or of another person, the critique of oneself should also be happening," because "one who understands does not claim to hold a superior position in advance, but instead admits that his or her own assumed truth must be put to the test in the act of understanding" (69-70). And understanding is rarely reached completely alone. For Gadamer,

The basic model of reaching an understanding together is dialogue or conversation. As we know only too well, a conversation is not possible if one of the partners believes himself or herself to be in a clearly superior position in comparison with the other person, and assumes that he or she possesses a prior knowledge of the erroneous prejudgments in which the other is entangled. If one does this, one actually locks oneself into the circle of one's own prejudices. Reaching an understanding dialogically is impossible if in principle one of the partners in a dialogue does not allow himself or herself to enter into a real conversation (Gadamer 2007, 70).

Indeed, as Nicholas Davey interprets Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, "understanding requires difference" and an openness to that difference. The hermeneutic encounter is a dialogue, and "dialogue demands the recognition that, in relation to the other, our assumptions are indeed questionable," and that we "risk becoming open to each other" and difficult to ourselves (Davey 2011, 169).

Davey teases out the implication that understanding through the hermeneutic encounter of the dialogue requires open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courtesy. He argues that "the aim of hermeneutical engagement is not…to achieve a mastery of adversarial argument but to use shared intellectual converse and intuition as a means to transcending and transforming one's initial presuppositions and outlooks," and thus "courtesy toward the other is not just an act of good will but a recognition of indebtedness." Without using the language of virtue epistemology, he still brings out the relevance of intellectual virtues, arguing that the "ethical orientation of hermeneutic practice entails a quiet modesty" (which could entail both epistemic modesty and intellectual humility) and "marks the acquisition of that knowledge which knows that whatever perspective we adopt with regard to a subject matter, it is as a limited

perspective and that we will be reliant on the other for placing it in a new light" (Davey 2011, 68–69), a new light that in Rorty's words might improve "belief, since new evidence, or new hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary, may come along" (Rorty 1999a, 23), an improvement we might miss if we are epistemically arrogant and intellectually discourteous.

Intellectual courtesy implies that we both listen to and engage with others in our conversations, because if we do not listen we are trapped in our own limited views, unable to expand our horizons beyond our conditioned prejudices. If nothing else, a commitment to intellectual freedom implies that we use that freedom wisely to listen to and attempt to understand beliefs we do not already hold, a view defended by John Stuart Mill, who argued that those who know only their "own side of the case, [know] little of that," and "must be able to hear [reasons for the opposition] from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and…know them in their most plausible and persuasive form" (Mill 2003, 105). Being open-minded and humble about our own knowledge requires us to cultivate the virtue of listening courteously—if perhaps skeptically—to others. For Gadamer, the hermeneutic encounter through dialogue is also an ethical encounter. According to Chris Lawn, Gadamer argues that "dialogue is the structure of hermeneutical understanding" and "provides the basis for a practical ethics" because it "demands patient listening to the voice of the other, discretion, courtesy, and… a recognition that no one voice has sole authority or a monopoly on truth." Opening ourselves to the other in a hermeneutic encounter makes explicit "classic moral virtues" of "patience, discretion, discernment and empathy" (Lawn 2006, 133).

If Gadamer is correct, we can only understand the world through language and "real conversation," and we can engage in genuine conversations *only if we practice the intellectual virtues of open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courtesy*. "The true reality of

human communication is such that a conversation does not simply carry one person's opinion through against another's in argument, or even simply add one opinion to another. Genuine conversation transforms the viewpoint of both" (Gadamer 2007, 96). If we cannot open our minds to the possibility of change, if we cannot consider the fact that we may not know what we think we know, we cannot achieve any understanding of the world at all. We cannot engage in any dialogues aimed toward knowledge or understanding, but only one-sided monologues that limit us to our "private and arbitrary subjective biases and prejudices."

In addition to open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courtesy, we must consider the virtue of intellectual thoroughness, also implied in the concept of a scholarly conversation. Entering into a scholarly conversation requires more than listening just to the voices that we already agree with. Opening our minds to the possibility of change requires us to consider courteously the voices of others with whom we might disagree. Information literate people must not only find scholarly conversations relevant to their research questions, but enter into them intelligently, and to do that means encountering the full range of voices already present in the conversation. This requires certain bibliographic skills that librarians often teach such as searching for and evaluating information, but it also involves a disposition to be thorough. Taking, for example, the first five results from a database search and trying to write a research essay in response to that "conversation" is perhaps a less aggravating intellectual vice than ignarrogance, but a vice it nonetheless is. It shows a lack of intellectual thoroughness as well as open-mindedness and intellectual humility. Cultivating intellectual thoroughness, becoming the sort of person who is dissatisfied with knowing well only one position on a topic, makes it more likely to engage in productive scholarly conversations.

Conclusion

Information literacy benefits from the metaphor of "scholarship as conversation," and elaborating the metaphor benefits from a virtue information literacy perspective. A scholarly conversation is a dialogue among two or more persons with the aim of understanding; it is a "hermeneutic encounter" in which we engage with others, usually through texts, in a process of inquiry to increase our own understanding with their aid. To engage in a genuine conversation— a dialogue and not a monologue—and invite the possibility of understanding that which we do not already know, and to contribute usefully to that conversation, we must open our minds to the possibility that the other has useful knowledge, courteously engage the other in conversation, and have the intellectual humility or modesty to accept that our beliefs—indeed our entire conception of ourselves—are never final, but always open to revision in the light of knew knowledge and understanding. Cultivating a range of intellectual virtues helps in this endeavor, particularly those of open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual courtesy, and intellectual thoroughness. Furthermore, librarians should do more than encourage students to cultivate such intellectual virtues; we should cultivate them ourselves.

VIL and the notion of intellectual or information virtues can be fruitfully applied to a range of information literacy behaviors and topics. Anytime we think of information literacy as a set of dispositions or character traits, anytime we seek to cultivate those traits in ourselves or our students, anytime we consider information-seeking behavior as an ethical encounter with others, and anytime we do so with the goal of giving ourselves and others the information literacy tools to live happier and more flourishing lives, we are at least implicitly applying a VIL perspective. In future, I hope to address the extraordinary measures we might have to take these days to

become information literate, as well as the possibility that libraries can be virtuous information

environments.

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