

# Virtue Information Literacy: Flourishing in an Age of Information Anarchy

Wayne Bivens-Tatum. *Virtue Information Literacy: Flourishing in an Age of Information Anarchy*. Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2022. 253 pp. \$35.00. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-63400-141-0

The field of Virtue Information Literacy (VIL) combines work in the fields of virtue ethics, virtue epistemology, and information literacy. The author Wayne Bivens-Tatum, the subject librarian for religion, philosophy, and anthropology at Princeton University Library, contextualizes the book within the Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) information literacy framework. The book is primarily written for academic librarians for this reason, and due to VIL traits and practices, is applicable to contexts of scholarly conversation and research. *Virtue Information Literacy* complements the Atla publication, *Information Literacy and Theological Librarianship: Theory and Practice* (ed. Bobby Smiley) from 2019 and is a welcome contribution for theological librarians interested in cultivating information literacy within theological education.

Bivens-Tatum situates the arguments of the book within the current environment of what he terms “information anarchy,” understood in the philosophical and political sense as a situation without clear or universal authorities. Bivens-Tatum identifies the overriding research questions and theoretical puzzles that define this project as, “What sort of person do we have to become to survive in such an environment? What sort of moral or intellectual character must we develop to flourish?” (3-4). VIL, he argues, provides an answer to these questions, and the field offers a kind of life-program to enable flourishing in the current environment. Virtues discussed include open-mindedness, intellectual humility, epistemic modesty, intellectual courage, intellectual caution, intellectual thoroughness, epistemic justice, information vigilance, and information asceticism. The author devotes an entire chapter to each of the latter two virtues.

The author summarizes the main argument of the book, writing, “[VIL] focuses on intellectual virtues that we can cultivate in ourselves and our students and that, if practiced, make it more likely for us to attain greater information literacy... [which] will help us lead more flourishing lives” (13). The argument applies both to individual efforts (our responsibility to develop virtues) as well as to social or environmental aspects (e.g., scholarly conversations and libraries as virtuous environments). Librarians, then, can use Bivens-Tatum’s theoretical work to design and encourage virtuous information environments such as library spaces, collection development and access, reference services, with an explicit goal of promoting intellectual virtue among users.

Bivens-Tatum uses the pragmatist philosophical tradition, notably the work of Richard Rorty, to argue for the essentially social nature of knowledge and truth. This argument allows the author to engage the ACRL information literacy frames of “scholarship as conversation” and “authority is contextual” in light of VIL. In other words, the social nature of knowledge implies conversation, and disparate fields of inquiry contextualize the authority of any given argument. Further, extending the argument that “authority” is not simply something that information either does or does not have, Bivens-Tatum argues that librarianship, at its heart, should be akin to Pyrrhonian Skepticism in that librarians rarely have a reason to define what is true themselves. Instead of responsibility to define what is true, librarians, in the VIL model, are there to foster intellectual virtues in students who are engaging with scholarly conversations. In such conversations, truth is up for debate and the participants of the dialogue (including the readers or students) must exercise a variety of intel-

lectual virtues in order to engage deeply with the range of voices encountered in any scholarly field. Bivens-Tatum contends that the virtue of intellectual thoroughness, in the context of scholarly conversations, implies the need for a wide-range of library research skills, further justifying librarian efforts in this area. Put simply, a student cannot practice the virtue of intellectual thoroughness if they do not utilize the range of capabilities of library research tools and organization.

Two of the author's most novel contributions to the growing literature on intellectual virtues and information literacy are his concepts of information vigilance and information asceticism. Utilizing psychological research on mindfulness and attention, Bivens-Tatum suggests that one ought to be information vigilant in order to resist and overcome information anarchy. Rigorous attention is required to engage deeply with scholarly conversations. Moreover, the psychology of habit-formation provides evidence for the need for constant training and habit-reinforcement for mindfulness. Hence, the author's insistence on vigilance when encountering and using information.

Secondly, Bivens-Tatum extends the concept of asceticism to VIL. He utilizes the "philosophy as a way of life" concept found within the work of Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault to propose the all-encompassing nature of VIL. The aim of VIL, for the author, is to resist and subvert the current information environment. Here, indeed, is Bivens-Tatum's most detailed account of VIL's main opponent. We "are to some extent naturally prone to intellectual vices such as confirmation bias, blindness to alternatives, forming strong beliefs with little to no justification, and 'ignarrogance' [a combination of ignorance and arrogance]... Overcoming that laziness and ignorance and developing a new resistant subjectivity requires knowing what we should do – e.g. develop intellectual virtues – and *lots* of difficult, dedicated, intellectual training and discipline over a long period of time" (190). While distraction is not new, corporate efforts to capture attention and political actors' perpetual propaganda and mis/disinformation require a special response.

*Virtue Information Literacy* is not a how-to manual for librarians. While Bivens-Tatum includes relevant ideas and practices for librarians, the book is largely a theoretical justification and introduction to VIL. Librarians will not find in this work a list of ideas for promoting VIL amongst their patrons, but rather will have to do that work on their own in conversation with the foundation the book provides. Similarly, the most likely critique of Bivens-Tatum work is the digressive nature of large portions of a number of the chapters. He reviews at great depth psychological research on the nature of the self, for instance, and considers many sides to the arguments for the nature of truth. Each chapter, indeed, risks containing more justification than is necessary for the reader. Bivens-Tatum seems aware of this charge, however, given he consciously encourages readers who need no additional justification for his positions to skip certain sections of the book. Indeed, theological librarians, especially those working in confessional or seminary contexts, may be willing to quickly concede to Bivens-Tatum the importance of a virtue ethics approach to information literacy. I suggest, along with the author, that such readers may profitably skip large portions of material in the book. Bivens-Tatum's end goal, to demonstrate how VIL leads to a flourishing life, seems rarely at stake in a number of the digressions. The extended discussions of psychological literature, Buddhist meditation practices, pragmatist philosophy, and so on, do, however, offer readers a glimpse into how Bivens-Tatum practices the kind of intellectual thoroughness he preaches.

My overall assessment of the book's contribution to the literature is quite positive. The author's tone is generous with respect to explaining concepts to non-experts and dealing with potential counterarguments. There are a large number and wide variety of citations across the fields of religious studies (especially Buddhism and Christian monasticism), philosophy (both ancient and modern), and psychology. The author appropriately addresses his own biases throughout the text, which improves the credibility of why he chooses to engage with particular disciplinary sub-fields

to buttress his main ideas. He expertly builds upon existing literature and combines the information found in his prior research into a coherent and iterative whole. The book makes a fine contribution to the growing literature connecting virtue ethics with information literacy. Though, as Bivens-Tatum argues, virtue ethics undergirds much of the implicit work of librarians' information literacy programs, this book is the first monograph-length direct treatment of the subject.

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