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Jonathan BRANT – Edward BROOKS – Michael LAMB (eds.): *Cultivating Virtue in the University,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, 288 pp.

The word *virtue* – or *character,* the term used interchangeably by the writers of the volume in question – are not concepts one would naturally associate with "university." The importance of the concept of "character education" is not new in the English-speaking world, but it has been researched by scholars primarily in the context of primary and secondary education. This volume, however, demonstrates the growing movement that emphasizes how the university can also be a "site for the cultivation of virtue" (4). In fact, the authors are convinced that, given the challenges and opportunities of higher education in the twenty-first century, character education is as important today as it was for a long time in the history of education. Whether or not it is acknowledged, universities – just like any educational institution – implicitly cultivate character, thus it is imperative that awareness should be raised about the *how*.

The aim of the book is to contend that universities not only *do,* but "critically and intentionally" (271) *should,* and, practically, *can* form the character of their students. The contributors to the volume come from a variety of academic disciplines, which enables a broad and comprehensive approach to the topic. The insights from history, education, psychology, philosophy, sociology, theology, and literature contribute to the conclusion that "colleges and universities can play a vital role in helping students become more virtuous in ways that promote their flourishing and the flourishing of their communities" (271).

The Introduction (Part 1, Chapter 1) sets the goal of answering the question "Should Universities Cultivate Virtues?" (7) and makes the case for a positive answer by giving an overview of the arguments presented in the chapters. The essays following the Introduction are divided into three parts. Part 1, "The University as a Context for Cultivating Virtue," (27) focuses on the larger historical, intellectual, social, and scientific context of character education at a tertiary level. Julie Reuben considers the history of modern American universities and underlines the fact that even though virtue was at the core of early American colleges, different historical, social, and cultural processes have eclipsed this original commitment, and reviving it is a task for today's educators. Chad Wellmon's paper (Chapter 3) focuses on the historical aspects of higher education in Germany. His starting point is Max Weber's distinction between *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*, and his conclusion is that "scholarly practice" – the research university – has moral limitations, which means that institutions "need to look outside themselves and partner with other moral traditions and resources" (54). The third paper in Part 2 is perhaps the most interesting one and raises the question: Isn't it late for character education by

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the time students leave high school? In the essay entitled "Developing Virtue in Emerging Adults," (57) Brian A. Williams answers this question by citing not only neuroscientific, but also psychological and sociological research. Emerging adults are defined as young people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, and, Williams concludes, research suggests that "the years of emerging adulthood" – the time when identity-formation and self-focus, among others, are distinctive features of the young person's life – "are especially formative ethically" (65).

Having set the context, Part 2 entitled "Institutional and Cultural Barriers to Cultivating Virtue" considers the difficulties associated with the language and discussion of character in the twenty-first century. In Chapter 5 a philosopher, Onora O'Neill, points out that while the eclipse of virtue in the university can partly be traced back to changes in the role and function of the university, that is, academics and teachers have less time for the "undertaking of fostering the wider aspects of education that can shape character and inculcate virtue" (84), the main reasons are due to deeper social, philosophical, and cultural trends. The disruptive changes of the past century have affected society's views of duties, rights, justice, and values, and have marginalized virtues, which means that, O'Neill argues, universities alone cannot resolve the consequences of this shift "without engaging wider approaches that do not reduce matters of justice to respect for individual rights, or ethical questions to the satisfaction of individual preferences" (95). In Chapter 6 Nigel Biggar addresses similar issues from the point of view of theology and suggests that Christian theology is "morally realist" and can thus give voice to often "unspoken moral commitments" (110).

Part 3 pursues the issue of "How to Cultivate Virtue in the University" further. Some of the six essays in this part are more theoretical, while others introduce and share the results of already existing initiatives. The editors of the volume participated in an initiative called Oxford Global Leadership Initiative (GLI) organized by Oxford Character Project. This voluntary, extracurricular program was designed for a group of postgraduate students from a range of scholarly disciplines at the University of Oxford. The first chapter in this part presents the theoretical framework based on the Aristotelian tradition of virtues in the form of "Seven Strategies of Character Development" (116) before describing in detail how the GLI put each one of these into practice. The next essay in Chapter 8 by Christian B. Miller is an imaginary recounting of a conversation between a university president and the author, who is a moral philosopher, on the idea and possibilities of cultivating virtue. Miller focuses on the virtue of honesty, and he assumes that cheating is one of the most common temptations students face during their studies. Similarly, Blaire Morgan and Liz Gulliford discuss a somewhat unexpected virtue in the next chapter, and they argue that the "superficially simple" concept of gratitude "can be better understood as a virtue" (18, 178). They also emphasize that even though in today's higher education there may be different barriers to the fostering of gratitude, practicing this virtue would have many beneficial effects not only on

social relationships but even on academic performance. Joanna Collicutt is both a psychologist and a theologian, and in Chapter 10 she analyses the figure of Jesus as a "virtuous character" and provides suggestions for how the characteristics exhibited by him could be "translated into a form appropriate for secular higher education" (208). The contributors of the final chapters, Jessica Richard (Chapter 11), and Paula M. L. Loyola and Lesley Larkin (Chapter 12), use literature as a framework for the understanding of certain virtues. Richard focuses on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to illustrate the "elusiveness of virtue, both our own and that of others" (224), while Loyola and Larkin examine contemporary narrative dystopias and emphasize the ethical possibilities – "decolonial pedagogy" in particular – of this kind of fiction to "expose our most deeply held assumptions and allow us to imagine different, and more just, ways of being in the world" (245).

Besides reviewing the most important lines of reasoning, the Conclusion, written by the editors of the volume, adds further aspects that should be considered when discussing the role and pedagogy of character education in higher education. Should the focus be on individual virtues or on their interconnection? How can character development be measured? In the end, Lamb, Brooks, and Brand conclude that there is a "need for reliable and well-evidenced methods" to provide "further impetus for scholars and educators to produce research that analyses the potential efforts to educate character" (270).

I propose that, for all the different reasons discussed by the authors, the topic of this book is relevant for anyone involved in higher education. The diversity of perspectives makes it possible to choose from a variety of angles from which the interconnection between virtue and character are approached, but the challenge to take the task of cultivating virtue in the university more seriously is present in all of them, and the examples and initiatives introduced could be a good basis for further thought and discussion. This should be a priority especially for Christian universities, where the cultivation of virtues is – or could be – by definition part of the mission statement of the institution. The Notes and Bibliography sections following each chapter provide excellent starting points for further contextualized research.