

The Freedom of Virtue: Navigating Excellence in the Art of Living Amongst a World of Instant Gratification (2019) by Tom Edwards and Cosimo Chiera. Samford Valley, QLD: Australian Academic Press Group Pty. ISBN: 9781925644142 (pbk).

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Reviewed by:
Kate Reimer

Book Review

What causes some people, and not others, to excel in life? This is the question Dr. Tom Edwards and Dr. Cosimo Chiera examine in *The Freedom of Virtue*. Digging beneath superficialities, they tap into a deep human desire to “search [not] for happiness, but for purpose, for respect and for excellence in the art of living” (p. xv).

In Chapter 1, the authors contend that one’s family of origin, intelligence, and socio-economic standing are insufficient predictors of excellence. Consequently, they turn to *virtue*, as distinguished from morals and character. They propose that virtue, along with its counterpart *vice*, impart individual and communal survival advantage. The authors apply three criteria for identifying foundational virtues: virtues that are “practical,” “found cross-culturally and over long spans of time,” and “few in number” (p. 34). The authors have been careful to counterbalance the traditionally male-dominant virtue narrative, incorporating numerous female voices, including researchers Cynthia Pury and Monika Ardelt.

The book is in the tradition of counselling literature, yet widely applicable. Mental health professionals will appreciate the academically sound but resolutely practical pages as they develop their own personal and therapeutic working models of excellence. Reflective questions, self-report inventories, and practical activities with direct relevance to therapists are regularly interspersed throughout. For example: “If you are a psychologist or counsellor what do you consider to be the most effective treatments for helping a burnt-out client?” (p. 78).

Having established virtue’s importance, Chapters 2–7 present the virtues of courage, diligence, wisdom, honour, justice, and kindness. Each chapter incorporates philosophical theories, historical and contemporary stories, current psychological research, and diverse religious and cultural perspectives.

Chapter 2 probes beneath the gender- and age-biased assumption equating courage with heroics to an exploration of the persevering nature of courage in the face of fear. Essentials for developing courage are discussed, including identification of values and resources, taking ownership of one's life, problem-solving, and engaging with "mastery experiences" (p. 61). A quote from Winston Churchill highlights the virtue's foundational quality: "Courage is the quality which guarantees all the others" (p. 37).

Whereas courage is the foundation, "diligence is the engine room" (p. 68). Diligence, with its unseen labour and precision, is considered the "hidden virtue" (p. 65). The long-term benefits of diligence and conscientiousness are highlighted, alongside their pitfalls: procrastination, burnout, and perfectionism. Practical strategies are offered for developing diligence in children as well as creating a workplace culture of diligence.

While the authors acknowledge that the multi-faceted virtue of wisdom could fill entire publications, they necessarily limit their discussion to wise decision-making. Misadventure, folly, and foolishness are differentiated, and a range of theorists analysed in the quest to define wisdom. Acknowledging that "wisdom is greater than the sum of its parts" (p. 111), integration of wisdom's cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions is tempered with appreciation of life's ambiguities. Attention to cognition seems disproportionate, while the reflective and affective domains could benefit from further research. However, considering the significant "wisdom work" of therapy (p. 91), this chapter contributes a functional and vital model to the limited psychological literature.

The focus now shifts from virtues more characteristic of individual success to explicitly relational virtues, beginning with honour. Chapter 5 feels remarkably human, with Chiera's upbringing in a Calabrian-Australian honour community offering insight into a misunderstood and largely "lost virtue" in today's Western society (p. 114). Examining the roles of glory, social hierarchy, shame, and dishonour, practical means for growth in both personal and group honour are presented. While current research seems markedly male-gendered, elsewhere the authors are broadening the dialogue, having demonstrated principles of honour active within female-oriented traditions.

The opening of Chapter 6 is underpinned by the question, how does one determine what is just? While philosophical theories define justice by utilitarianism, personal rights, or merit, the authors contend that these alone are insufficient, requiring also psychological considerations. The conversation includes but moves beyond moral reasoning and action, as even these do not form justice's totality. Forgiveness as tempering an otherwise austere application of justice is examined and strategies given for developing justice in children. The latter may seem irrelevant for practitioners in non-child related work, however with some creativity the principles may be applied to fostering the virtue in adult clientele who lacked childhood justice development.

Kindness may seem a simplistic virtue but is powerfully applied. Fanciful assumptions equating kindness with generosity are challenged in a familiar story, *The Prodigal Son* (note that the authors present from the perspective of virtues as opposed to the subjugating morality of patriarchy). Generosity, with its susceptibility to self-interest, is

considered merely a means to kindness. The authors therefore assert that kindness is rather fuelled by compassion. Exemplified in successful foster carers, compassion requires entering another's suffering, thereby giving of oneself. Herein lies the power of kindness, able to "change the quality of the suffering" (p. 179).

The virtues are drawn together in Chapter 8 to answer the book's opening question, "what makes for excellence in the art of life?" (p. 1). Historical examples demonstrate what integration of the virtues may look like with its complex nuances, challenges, and rewards. While the distinctly strengths-based flavour may be helpful for practically developing and "mastering" (p. 194) the virtues, I question whether such an approach may risk harmful striving, particularly in those with trauma backgrounds. However, it may be proposed that a trauma-informed integration of the virtues in therapeutic practice may complement clients' recovery.

As an increasing number of clinicians integrate virtues into their practice, the field is rich for research. The framework is established for an inquiry into the challenges and resources the virtues present for specific client populations. The authors would welcome a multi-gendered perspective, exploring gender differences in virtue's expression. While limited due to the constraints of a single volume, *The Freedom of Virtue* accomplished its aim: to provide those in helping roles with a relevant and practical handbook for the development of virtue. I commend this foundational book to therapists of all modalities as a therapeutic tool for individual and relational flourishing.

– Kate Reimer

kate@doongallacounselling.com.au

Kate Reimer, BA (Counselling), supports adults and youth in Melbourne's outer East through her private practice, Doongalla Counselling. Additionally, she works part-time as a school counsellor while also pursuing her Master's degree. She has a particular interest in supporting trauma recovery.

Website: www.doongallacounselling.com.au

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