



Ethical

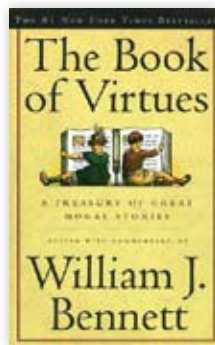
Communication

BY KATHERINE PENNAVARIA

IF YOU MAKE PUBLIC COMMENTS ON WEB PAGES, SCOTT AIKIN JUST MIGHT BE WATCHING. AIKIN, A PART-TIME INSTRUCTOR FOR THE PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION DEPARTMENT, IS CURRENTLY STUDYING, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THE PHENOMENON OF INTERNET COMMENTS ON NEWS ARTICLES AND BLOGS. THE STUDY IS PART OF A RESEARCH PROGRAM THAT INVOLVES THE ETHICS OF INTERNET COMMUNICATION.

Aikin is interested particularly in examining the focus of such Internet comments. Are the writers of comments focusing on the ideas of the original writer, or do they attack the character of the writer instead? Internet communication often involves the latter. Often, he says, people disagree with or dismiss the political views of a

person simply because they dislike the speaker's character. Aikin studies the way that assessing arguments through the lens of character derails other reasoning processes. "We are motivated highly to focus on people's characters," he says. "It's easier to talk about people's characters than about the things they say."



But a person's character does not make or break the validity of that person's ideas, insists Aikin. For example, former Secretary of Education William Bennett published a book called *The Book of Virtues*, which extolled, among other things, the value of self-discipline. The ideas expressed by the book have a universally agreed-on merit, and this merit is in no way undermined by the fact

that Bennett had a self-admitted gambling problem. "It's crazy that we dismiss a person's arguments because we don't like his actions," says Aikin. "People completely dismiss ideas when they dismiss a person."

The Latin phrase for attacking the character of someone rather than his/her argument is *ad hominem* (or "to the man"). "*Ad hominem* reasoning works," Aikin says, "by distracting you from an issue that you think is important, because assessing the character is easier and more compelling." Fear of personal attack keeps many people from making public statements, even though such attacks have almost no relation to the ideas expressed.

In a larger sense, Aikin studies the nature of knowledge, called "epistemology." How do we know what we know? Why do we believe what we believe? And when do we finally, truly, "know" something? In other words, when does questioning end? The possible answers are abstract, and fascinating to Aikin.

Three positions have been put forward to explain what happens during the reasoning process. The first, foundationalism, says that reasoning stops by itself at a natural end point; the second, coherentism, says that reasoning isn't linear, but sometimes reasons come in large sets that have to "hang together" as plausible, interconnected stories. Aikin is interested in a third position, called epistemic infinitism, which promotes the idea that reasoning could theoretically go on forever. "If I know something," he says, "I must



justification. However, any justification will require support, since nothing can be true just because it is true. We can always ask how we know something is true. So justifications can be questioned infinitely. (Any parent who has been stuck in a "but why?" loop with a child will understand this.)

In addition to his research on the regress problem, Aikin is about to publish a book on the ethics of belief. He teaches an ethics class at WKU, and as part of the class, encourages students to think about "group fidelity," or the idea that if one is a member of a group, people expect certain behaviors that conform to the group. Those expectations can stifle questioning. He tries to instill in the students

How do we know what we know? Why do we believe what we believe? And when do we finally, truly, "know" something? In other words, when does questioning end? The possible answers are abstract, and fascinating to Aikin.

have good reasons for knowing it. Well, what makes something a good reason? For that first good reason, I've got to have another good reason, and so on." In other words, to hold a single position, one must hold multiple positions.

The notion that any proposition can be endlessly questioned is called the "regress problem." A regress of questions gets started by the thought that every proposition requires a

a sense that they are free to inquire, that one can disagree with a position or an argument while remaining respectful of the person arguing. In fact, Aikin sees something positive in disagreement: "People who disagree with you and question you really care about the truth." Asking people to defend their positions, he says, is "part of the democratic process. It's good citizenship to question. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment

Aikin tries to instill in the students a sense that they are free to inquire, that one can disagree with a position or an argument while remaining respectful of the person arguing. In fact, he sees something positive in disagreement: "People who disagree with you and question you really care about the truth."

taught us this very thing," he adds. "The truth matters and we shouldn't be afraid of inquiry."

Aikin's career studying knowledge started during his studies at Washington University in St. Louis (BA '94). A classics major, he was expected to focus on the linguistic

and historic aspects of Greek and Roman culture. But instead, he found himself far more interested in the "eternally important questions" the ancient writers asked about art, politics, nature, knowledge, justice, and virtue. So when he started graduate school, he traded classics

for philosophy, and has never looked back. He completed an MA in 1999 at the University of Montana and a Ph.D. at Nashville's Vanderbilt University in 2006. From the first philosophy class, Aikin was hooked. "The first class I took was one in epistemology, and I just felt the force of the proposed ideas about knowledge." He has created his current research project around the ideas absorbed in that first class in Montana.

Aikin is the author of one book and the editor of another; he has also published numerous articles in journals such as *Philosophical Studies*, *Argumentation*, *Synthese*, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, and *Teaching Philosophy* on such topics as epistemology, argumentation, pragmatism, and hypocrisy. And when he isn't writing for publication or teaching classes, he is online, collecting data. So next time you leave a comment at <cnn.com> or one of the many blog pages on the Internet, remember that Scott Aikin just might be reading it. ■

Aikin found himself far more interested in the "eternally important questions" the ancient writers asked about art, politics, nature, knowledge, justice, and virtue.

