

INTEGRITY

In the following extract from his recent book *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* the philosopher Michael P. Lynch discusses the importance of intellectual integrity.

How many times has this happened to you: you are sitting on a bus, or talking to your in-laws, or chatting at a party, and someone says something racist, or homophobic, or just plain mean. There is a momentary pause. You know that what was said was wrong and hurtful, and you want to say something about it, something that politely but firmly indicates that you thought the remark inappropriate. But you don't, and the moment passes. Later, thinking back on it, you think of all the things you might have said. You feel bad. You feel you've let yourself down.

Context matters, of course. In such situations, tact is often called for, and you must pick your battles. Nonetheless, we don't always stand up for what we think is right, even when we could. When that happens, we lack what we might call intellectual integrity.

Intellectual integrity is an aspect or part of integrity proper. It requires being willing to stand up for your best judgment of the truth, by being willing to act in accordance with that judgment when the need arises. Like other intellectual virtues, intellectual integrity is a character trait. This means that you can have intellectual integrity even if you are never called on to stand up for what you believe, and even if you are prevented from standing up for what you believe. What matters is that you are *willing* to do so, that you are disposed, other things being equal, to try.

You don't lack intellectual integrity simply because you've done something wrong. Nor is it the same as not having self-control ... Intellectual integrity requires caring for the truth for its own sake. This reveals itself in several important ways in our ordinary life. First, people who run around loudly defending whatever view they happen to land on, whether or not they've bothered to examine whether it is true, lack intellectual integrity. Willingness to stand for anything amounts to standing for nothing.

Second, a person with intellectual integrity is someone who is willing to *pursue* the truth. This means they are willing, as much as possible, to figure things out for themselves, to form their own opinion, to not just go along with the crowd or whatever happens to be fashionable or expedient. Consider, for example, a tobacco company executive who claims he is concerned about the safety of cigarette smoke. In forming his opinion that smoking does not cause cancer, he might consult several scientific studies. But intuitively, if he consults only those studies conducted by scientists on the company pay-roll, and ignores all the evidence amassed by those who are not, he lacks intellectual integrity – precisely because he has not really bothered to pursue the truth about the matter. If he is honest with himself, he cannot say that he is standing for his

own best judgment on the matter, that is for the judgment most likely to be true. He has not really bothered to determine what that judgment is. He is rather standing for what is most expedient for him to believe given his position.

Third, a person of intellectual integrity stands for what she thinks is true *precisely because she thinks it is true*. Martin Luther King, Jr., implicitly makes this point in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In the letter, King responds to some leading clergymen who, while claiming that they agreed with the substance of King's view on race, derided King's protest movement against segregation in Alabama as "unwise and untimely." During his impassioned reply, King writes:

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have heard white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities ... Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?

King believed his "moderate" critics were lacking integrity because while they said they wanted integration, they would encourage it insofar as it was already legal. When the chips were down – when the law and what they said they believed were inconsistent – they went with the law. But as King reminds them elsewhere in the letter, legality is not morality. Just because something is legal is not any reason to think it is the right thing to do, and just because something is illegal doesn't mean it is wrong. What distresses King is that if the white preachers really thought that African Americans have civil rights, they should say just that. Further, they should support the peaceful protest of any laws that were inconsistent with such rights. But rather than standing up for what they said they believed was true, they stood up instead for what was legal.

Fourth, intellectual integrity also requires being open to the truth just because it is the truth. To be open to the truth is to be willing to admit that you are wrong. A good example of this is the actions of Governor Ryan, former Republican governor of Illinois. When elected to office, Ryan was a staunch defender of the death penalty. But in January 2000, after it was revealed that since 1977 thirteen people convicted of the death penalty were subsequently exonerated (while twelve others were executed), Ryan placed a controversial moratorium on executions in the state. He would not, he said, approve any more executions until a thorough examination of the state's procedures for state executions was implemented and the process found to be neither arbitrary nor capricious. Some criticized Ryan's actions as lacking intellectual integrity because he had changed his mind. But to say this is to betray a lack of understanding of what intellectual integrity is. Intellectual integrity is not simply a matter of being consistent. Gritting your teeth and holding to what you've said in the past in the face of new evidence is not intellectual integrity, but stupidity. Thus, far from

lacking in integrity, Ryan's actions, on this matter at least, were a paradigmatic instance of it, precisely because he was open to his view on the matter being mistaken, and he was willing to pursue the question until he felt confident that he had formed the best judgment possible about the matter.

Persons with intellectual integrity, it is worth emphasizing, don't care about truth selectively, whenever it suits them. Indeed, that's part of the point: to have intellectual integrity is to be willing to stand for one's own best judgment on any matter of importance – not just when it is convenient to do so. And since, as far as we know, almost any matter could be important at some point or other, to have integrity means caring about the truth in general. To have it, one must be open to having true beliefs in general, and pursuing the truth in general, on those questions that come before you, whatever those may be.

