

# Being humble about what you know is just one part of what makes you a good thinker, says researcher

October 25 2023, by Eranda Jayawickreme

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What does it mean to be a good thinker? Recent research suggests that acknowledging you can be wrong plays a vital role.

I had these studies in mind a few months ago when I was chatting with a history professor about a class she was teaching to first-year students here at Wake Forest University. As part of my job as a [psychology professor who researches character](#)—basically, what it means to be a good person—I often talk to my colleagues about how our teaching can develop the character of our students.

In this case, my colleague saw her class as an opportunity to cultivate character traits that would allow students to respectfully engage with and learn from others when discussing contentious topics. Wanting to learn about and understand the world is a [distinctive human motivation](#). As teachers, we want our students to leave college with the ability and motivation to understand and learn more about themselves, others and their world. She wondered: Was there one characteristic or trait that was most important to cultivate in her students?

I suggested she should focus on [intellectual humility](#). Being intellectually humble means being open to the possibility you could be wrong about your beliefs.

But is being humble about what you know or don't know enough?

I now think my recommendation was incorrect. It turns out good thinking requires more than [intellectual humility](#)—and, yes, I see the irony that admitting this means I had to draw on my own intellectual humility.

## Acknowledging you might not be right

One reason for my focus on intellectual humility was that without acknowledging the possibility that your current beliefs may be mistaken, you literally can't learn anything new. While being open to being wrong is generally quite challenging—especially for first-year university students confronting the limits of their understanding—it is arguably the key first step in learning.

But another reason for my response is that [research on intellectual humility has exploded](#) in the past 10 years. Psychologists now have [many different ways](#) to assess intellectual humility. Social scientists know that possessing a high level of intellectual humility is associated with multiple [positive outcomes](#), like [having more empathy](#), more [prosocial behavior](#), [reduced susceptibility to misinformation](#) and an [increased inclination to seek compromise](#) in challenging interpersonal disagreements.

If you want to focus on one trait to promote good thinking, it seems that intellectual humility is hard to beat. Indeed, researchers, [including those in my own lab](#), are now testing interventions to promote it among different populations.

## A single trait won't make you a good thinker

However, was I right in recommending just a single trait? Is intellectual humility by itself enough to promote good thinking? When you zoom out to consider what is really involved in being a good thinker, it becomes clear that simply acknowledging that one could be wrong is not enough.

To provide an example, perhaps someone is willing to acknowledge that they could be wrong because "whatever, man." They didn't have particularly strong convictions to begin with. In other words, it's not

enough to say you're mistaken about your beliefs. You also need to care about having the right beliefs.

While part of being a good thinker involves recognizing one's possible ignorance, it also requires an eagerness to learn, curiosity about the world, and a commitment to getting it right.

What other traits, then, should people strive to cultivate? The philosopher Nate King writes that being a good thinker [involves possessing multiple traits](#), including intellectual humility, but also intellectual firmness, love of knowledge, curiosity, carefulness and open-mindedness.

Being a good thinker involves confronting multiple challenges beyond being humble about what you know. You also need to:

- Be sufficiently motivated to figure out what's true.
- Focus on the pertinent information and carefully seek it out.
- Be open-minded when considering information that you may disagree with.
- Confront information or questions that are novel or different from what you're generally used to engaging with.
- Be willing to put in the effort to figure it all out.

This is a lot, but philosopher Jason Baehr writes that possessing good intellectual character [requires successfully addressing all these challenges](#).

## **Additional ingredients for good thinking**

So, I was wrong to say that intellectual humility was the silver bullet that can teach students how to think well. Indeed, being intellectually humble—in a way that promotes good thinking—likely involves being

both curious and open-minded about new information.

Focusing on a single characteristic such as intellectual [humility](#) rather than the totality of intellectual character ends up promoting lopsided character development, similar to that of a bodybuilder focusing their [efforts on one bicep rather than their whole body](#).

My lab's current work is now attempting to address this issue by defining the good [thinker](#) in terms of multiple intellectual traits. This approach is similar to work in personality science that has identified key traits of people who are psychologically healthy as well as those whose patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving cause enduring distress or problems. We hope to further understand [how good thinkers function in daily life](#)—for example, their personality, the quality of their relationships and their well-being—as well as how their intellectual [character influences their thinking, behavior and sense of identity](#).

I think [this work](#) is vital in order to understand the key characteristics of good thinking and to learn more about how to build these habits in ourselves and others.

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