

## **VIRTUE AND THE QUIET ART OF SCHOLARSHIP: RECLAIMING THE UNIVERSITY**

Anne Pirrie. London: Routledge. 156 pages

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In reviewing *Virtue and the Quiet Art of Scholarship*, I believe it is important to outline at the beginning precisely what the book is, and what it isn't. There are a number of clear references in the book to precisely what the book is trying to achieve or embody, namely that it should be considered as a 'manual for living with defeat'. This speaks to me as I'm sure it will to other early career researchers, learning to live with rejection emails from academic journals as well as those from multiple job applications. But Pirrie's neat little manual is by no means defeat-*ist*, instead it offers a way forward for learning to live with what we know and a reconsideration of what it is to be a 'good knower' in the contemporary university. In short, this book is an academic book, but given its originality, it is not one that would lend itself to easy comparison with others also seeking to 'reclaim' or reinvigorate the contemporary university.

Pirrie's book takes its readers on a journey with many twists and turns guided by different characters along the way, both real and fictitious, including Leonard Cohen, Tim Ingold, Raymond Carver, Nan Shepherd, and Ali Smith's characters Elizabeth Demand and Daniel Gluck from her novel *Autumn*. While I am referring to reading the book as a journey, it is one of wayfaring rather than travelling, a central distinction Anne draws on throughout and embodies in her own writing. Referring to Ingold's work, Pirrie explains that 'travelling' implies simply 'being transported across a surface from one location to another', whilst 'wayfaring' involves 'moving along a path, attentively' (p.35). The other distinctions made by Pirrie, and which serve as landmarks guiding readers through the book, are those between sketch and plan, inhabitant and occupant knowledge, and that between measured historical time (*Chronos*) and time as lived experience (*Kairos*). While these distinctions are useful and valuable in delineating what 'good' research and 'doing good work well' might look like despite current accountability and performativity pressures, Pirrie does warn her readers that they should be careful of the 'seductive neatness' of acknowledging these distinctions uncritically (p.37). The distinctions made between different ways of knowing, being with, and experiencing one's research should also be seen in light of a much broader categorisation of epistemic virtues as either 'quiet' or loud, brash and self-aggrandizing.

As Pirrie argues, drawing on the work of Richard Smith, the 'quieter' epistemic virtues such as modesty, diffidence and humility tend to be side-lined in a

competitive culture which lends itself more to the over-inflation and celebration of one's achievements. This is not to say that academic achievements such as high impact REF-able research outputs should not be celebrated, but rather that the 'tough-minded' virtues of intellectual rigour, courage and bravery cannot be allowed to dominate over the quieter epistemic virtues (Smith, 2016: 275; Pirrie, 2019:2). It is precisely in the avocation of such quieter epistemic virtues as lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity – virtues discussed at length by Italo Calvino – that Anne's book differs from others seeking to 'reclaim' the university.

As I see it, this book achieves something similar to Nan Shepherd's *Living Mountain*, which encouraged people set on scaling a mountain's peaks to come to know it differently, by going 'inside' the mountain, coming to know it as one knows and visits a friend, and devoting attention to the recesses. In doing this, Shepherd's book contributed to 'mountain' rather than simply 'mountaineering' literature (Macfarlane, 2011). Pirrie's book is different to others in the discipline as it helpfully moves readers away from the language of 'owning' a body of knowledge or drawing boundaries around disciplinary 'landscapes', towards a more open and expansive consideration of what it means to be a 'good knower'.

In the preface, Pirrie states that she will explore, if not necessarily find definitive answers to, the following questions: 'How can we live our lives better, now, in this moment?', and 'How can we live with what we know?' (p.xiii). It seems as if one answer to these questions can be found in the distinctions made between inhabitant and occupant knowledge, travelling and wayfaring etc. But such distinctions are meant to provoke and prompt, rather than close down, further discussion. A more virtuous answer is that one must simply keep doing what they're doing, that is, keep doing good work well. Crucially, doing good work well does not imply that one must shout about their achievements, publish four peer-reviewed journal articles per year, or let REF impact determine what research one conducts. If one is committed to the quieter epistemic virtues of modesty, diffidence and humility, then learning to live with what one knows will surely become part of the research process rather than a measurable output or 'deliverable' of it. What Pirrie is ultimately arguing against here is the commodification of epistemic virtues in an increasingly marketised Higher Education sector, whether these are the quieter virtues or not.

The book draws on Richard Smith's work at various points, particularly his concept of 'unknowing', and Pirrie then tackles head-on what Smith terms the 'paradox of being knowing about unknowing' (2016: 272). The book explicates what the virtues of unknowing may encompass for scholars in academia now, while also deftly avoiding falling into the trap of a vacuous kind of 'knowingness'. As I approached the final chapter, entitled 'closing time', I did feel slightly bereft at having to leave behind such entertaining and thought-provoking characters; they have left their mark on me as a reader and a scholar, and I believe the book's greatest accolade is that readers will not want to leave behind the experience of reading it. In seeking to reclaim the university, Pirrie states that 'I hope that this book will afford its readers a glimmer of light(ness) behind the prevailing sense of despair about the state of the contemporary university'; as a forward-looking and positive 'manual for living with defeat', it certainly delivers this.