Helping Open-mindedness Flourish

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The ideal of open-mindedness first emerges in Greek philosophy and is succinctly and memorably captured in the Socratic notion of being prepared to follow the argument where it leads (Hare, 2009, p. 7). This means being genuinely concerned to avoid bias, wishful thinking, and other factors, that threaten to compromise a serious examination of the evidence (Hare, 2007, p. 21); and it means being ready to view one's conclusions, no matter how strongly supported, as potentially revisable in the light of further evidence given the fallible nature of knowledge claims (Hare, 1993, p. 88). An open-minded person is prepared to entertain any relevant evidence, to concede that an unwelcome conclusion indeed follows, and to allow that a position presently held cannot be sustained. In brief, open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue that reveals itself in a willingness to form and revise our ideas in the light of a critical review of evidence and argument that strives to meet the elusive ideals of objectivity and impartiality (Hare, 1993, p. 81).[1]

It is all too easy, of course, to fall short of the norms embedded in the moral and intellectual virtues. Threats of violence and other unwelcome consequences lead us to abandon our ideals in the face of risks and dangers; excuses, exceptions, and rationalizations very quickly undermine our allegiance to fundamental principles; fears, temptations and pressures weaken our resolve and override any inclination we might otherwise have to act virtuously. Open-mindedness is equally vulnerable. All too often, evidence that might point elsewhere is ignored or discounted, alternative possibilities are dismissed out of

hand, and reasons are sought merely to support a conclusion that is already regarded as settled.

The tenuous nature of open-mindedness has been a recurrent theme in the history of philosophy since Socrates first identified open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue and called attention to the prevalence of dogmatic certainty. Locke expresses concern about the tendency to make up our minds in advance that contrary views must be mistaken:

> Let not men think there is no truth but in the sciences that they study or the books that they read. To prejudge other men's notions before we have looked into them is not to show their darkness but to put out our own eyes. (Locke, 1966, p. 38)

Hume notes that people are reluctant to weigh the evidence carefully in coming to a conclusion, retreating instead towards closed-mindedness in order to escape from uncertainty and confusion:

> To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. They are, therefore, impatient till they escape from a state, which to them is so uneasy; and they think, that they could never remove themselves far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy of belief. (Hume, 1955, p. 188)

Education often does little to foster an open-minded concern for evidence. Many teachers fail to model open-mindedness for their students: they resist alternative suggestions, refuse to admit their mistakes, and fail to indicate that present views may change; they encourage or tolerate an uncritical acceptance of ideas; and they are sometimes overly concerned to transmit their own convictions. Students come to hold beliefs non-evidentially because an emphasis is placed on being able to state the right answer even though one cannot offer a suitable justification (Green, 1972, p. 34); or because taken-for-granted assumptions are never subjected to critical examination that might reveal alternative possibilities (Freire, 1982). With respect to controversial matters, schools often fail to challenge the relativistic ethos that encourages students to think that their own opinion is as good as any other; and critical thinking may be presented in such a way that it only encourages cynicism about knowledge and inquiry. In these ways, education fails to develop an appreciation of the nature of serious inquiry and open-minded reflection is discouraged.

Anyone who values open-mindedness will find these observations troubling; they point to serious challenges and difficulties standing in the way of the ideal. It is natural to wonder what it would take for open-mindedness to flourish.

1. A vital clue is found in Russell's fundamental insight that open-mindedness will always exist where desire for knowledge is genuine (Russell, 1973, p. 133). The connection Russell has in mind is clear enough. A genuine desire for knowledge manifests itself in such dispositions as giving careful consideration to argument and evidence, not discounting contrary findings, accepting new ideas and results that survive critical scrutiny, paying attention to views opposed to our own, and admitting that what we presently take to be true may turn out to be mistaken (Hare, 1985, p. 4; Flew, 1985, p. 234; Haack, 1996, p. 58). These dispositions demonstrate a sincere desire for knowledge because the person who possesses them is ready to ask in a serious way whether what is thought to be true really is true, to consider the possibility that contrary views held by others may be true, to abandon cherished convictions when the evidence indicates they are mistaken, and to accept new ideas, no matter how unwelcome, if they are rationally justified. If we can cultivate in ourselves and others a genuine desire for knowledge, open-mindedness will necessarily flourish as a concomitant virtue because it is the very attitude revealed by these same dispositions: to consider what is to be said for and against an idea, to be receptive to new ideas that are well supported, to take into account alternative views, and to recognize that current convictions may have to be revised, is *ipso facto* to display an open-minded outlook.

2. What purports to be a genuine concern for truth and knowledge, however, sometimes amounts to no more than "caring about what you believe is certain" (Lynch, 2004, p. 3), an attitude we detect in those who engage in indoctrination or hold fanatical convictions. Here the belief in question is not subjected to the kind of critical examination that might show it to be false; on the contrary, everything is done to ensure that it survives intact. Such caring amounts to a dogmatic commitment to protect and preserve what one already regards as true, exempting and shielding it from further critical review. This is incompatible with a genuine desire for knowledge, and destroys open-mindedness, precisely because it precludes giving serious consideration to evidence that might show that what we take to be true is actually erroneous. Consider the case of Dr. Charles Smith, the disgraced Ontario pediatric pathologist who worked at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and whose numerous errors resulted in grievous miscarriages of justice during the 1990s and beyond (Goudge, 2008). Smith was primarily interested in evidence that would support his general suspicion in the cases before him that the child's death was not accidental; he ignored conflicting evidence, formed dogmatic opinions on meager evidence, and arrogantly

dismissed contrary views put forward by genuine forensic experts. Open-mindedness involves a determination not to ignore, exclude, or conceal relevant evidence, and requires a readiness to revise our beliefs if subsequent inquiries indicate that they are mistaken or incomplete. If open-mindedness is to flourish, a concern for truth is vital but it must be understood to mean a commitment to doing our best to establish whether or not a certain belief is indeed true.

3. Believing at the outset that a particular view is correct (or mistaken) is not inconsistent with a genuine desire for knowledge, provided that we regard the belief we hold as revisable in the light of emerging evidence, endeavor to ensure that the belief in question does not distort our inquiries, and remain prepared to adjust our initial opinion in accordance with the findings. Henry Whitehead investigated the cholera outbreak in London in 1854 quite convinced, as he began his work, that John Snow's waterborne theory was mistaken. Whitehead did not, however, set out to defend a conclusion to which he was irrevocably committed. A conviction that finding out the truth and avoiding error was really important led him to conduct a painstaking search for decisive evidence that would confirm or refute the various objections to the waterborne theory, ultimately bringing Whitehead to the unexpected conclusion that Snow's theory was indeed correct (Johnson, 2006). What is crucial if open-mindedness is to flourish is that we view our beliefs as vulnerable. Pretensions to absolute certainty must be replaced by an outlook that, in Russell's words, "does not imagine that it knows the whole truth, or even that its best knowledge is wholly true" (Russell, 1961, p. 245).

4. Open-mindedness flourishes in the context of a suitably fallibilist view of human inquiry (Rescher, 1999, p. 34) that acknowledges the tentative character of our would-be knowledge and what Hume calls "a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty" (Hume, 1955, p. 189). Such fallibilism, however, needs to be distinguished from an utterly cynical view about the possibility of knowledge that, as Susan Haack reminds us, dismisses a concern for truth as merely "a smokescreen disguising the operations of power, politics, and rhetoric" (Haack, 2008, p. 26). In similar vein, Michael Lynch notes that "cynicism about truth and related notions like objectivity and knowledge has become the semiofficial philosophical stance of many academic disciplines" (Lynch, 2004, p. 1). The insidious nature of this cynical outlook is clear since it carries the implication that open-mindedness is no virtue at all. If there is no truth to be found, and if a concern for truth and a desire for knowledge are simply naive or disingenuous, the dispositions associated with

open-mindedness are empty exercises; weighing evidence, reviewing objections, and considering alternative possibilities only make sense if we are trying to determine what is really the case. The cynical view manages to gain a spurious plausibility by running together crucial distinctions, such as that between knowledge and certainty, pluralism and relativism, and so on. It quietly ignores the self-refuting nature of claims that purport to show that truth is mythical and is oblivious to the moral consequences that follow if we are unable to say that claims put forward to support abhorrent ideologies are false (Siegel, 1997, p. 152; Haack, 2008, p. 33)). Open-mindedness cannot flourish unless the influence of such debilitating cynicism is effectively challenged.

5. An appreciation of our own fallibility may, however, work against our would-be open-mindedness, especially when we ponder the disconcerting fact that many ideas that once seemed incredible proved to be true. Before the discovery of silk, Bacon points out, "if anyone had said anything about a worm, he would no doubt have been laughed at as dreaming of a new kind of cobwebs" (Bacon, 1960, p. 101). Completely unexpected, counterintuitive, and seemingly impossible ideas sometimes turn out to be true, but this very fact may encourage in us a reluctance to dismiss any idea as absurd or groundless. The danger is that an admirable disposition to take new ideas seriously may turn into gullibility unless we forestall premature and foolish conclusions by carefully examining the evidence for and against such ideas, ascertaining the views of relevant experts, and monitoring the trustworthiness of our sources. We can begin by becoming familiar with the numerous hoaxes, Ponzi schemes, urban legends, conspiracy theories, and junk science exposed in the literature on skepticism (Carroll, 2003), and by learning to recognize various techniques, such as distraction, innuendo, "expert" endorsement, and appeals to prejudice, that are regularly employed to make such ideas appear plausible. In addition, we can develop the habit of raising the kinds of questions likely to detect baseless claims (Shermer, 2001); we can look for the tell-tale signs of suspect theories and dubious sources (Gardner, 1981; Beyerstein, 2001; Park, 2003); and we can come to understand, and try to counteract, those tendencies that leave us vulnerable to credulity, such as wishful thinking, suggestibility, and excessive confidence in our own judgment. Being receptive to the point of being duped is not a form of open-mindedness at all and such gullibility undermines our claim to have a concern for truth and a genuine desire for knowledge.

6. Similar precautions are necessary with respect to bias. Socrates pointed out the way in which decorative language, unsubstantiated

rumors, and popular misconceptions distort our thinking (*Apology* 17a-19a), and contemporary psychology has confirmed the existence of powerful and ubiquitous biases that subvert our efforts to engage in open-minded inquiry and the search for truth. Myside bias leads us to favor our own interests (Stanovich, 2009); confirmation bias leads us to embrace whatever supports our own position and to discount unfavorable evidence (Tavris and Aronson, 2007); perseverance bias leads us to favor our initial beliefs even when disconfirming evidence is presented (Philips, 2008). These and other biases are compounded by the blind spot bias, the belief that we ourselves are relatively free from bias (Stanovich, 2009). We fondly believe we are being open-minded because we fail to detect the influences that govern our thinking; and we fail to worry about such influences because we see ourselves as relatively immune. Open-minded inquiry is more likely to flourish if we can become familiar with the major forms of bias, how they operate, and how difficult it is to resist them (Fine, 2006; Tavris and Aronson, 2007). Where possible, as in science, it is clearly useful to establish formal mechanisms, such as peer review and double-blind experiments, in order to detect and offset bias (Haack, 2003). It is valuable also to try to discover the types of bias we ourselves are most prone to (Locke, 1966, p. 58), to look for strategies that can help to counteract our own particular blind spots (Flew, 1975, p. 62), and to remain conscious of our own interests and desires if we are not simply to find what we hope to find (Sagan, 1980, p. 68). Such efforts are likely to be thwarted, however, if we start to believe that every view inevitably involves and reflects a bias. At this point, the real danger of bias turns into the supposed impossibility of ever avoiding, reducing, countering, or eliminating bias, and this can only discourage open-minded reflection on our ideas.

7. Problems such as gullibility and bias suggest that it is useful to bear in mind the distinction between intending to proceed in an open-minded manner, and actually succeeding at this (Scarre, 2005, p. 464). We may be genuinely motivated to be open-minded, think it important to revise our views in the light of evidence, and yet fall short of the virtue in practice. We may not see, what is plain to an acute observer, that we are not as willing to review the evidence as we might like to think: we resist evidence that undermines our own view, we are too easily persuaded by weak evidence, we tend to look for evidence that confirms our own theory, and so on. In addition to the critical skills and dispositions that would enhance our ability to assess our own behavior, we also need to cultivate and draw support from other virtues. The virtues do not stand alone (Nidditch, 1970, p. 8; Cohen, 2010, p. 60). We need

courage to inquire into matters in an open-minded way when doing so will probably lead to angry confrontations with one's colleagues or expose one to costly lawsuits (Tavris, 2007). If we are to avoid becoming overconfident and arrogant, intellectual humility will serve us well in helping us to remember that there may be weaknesses in our views that we ourselves fail to recognize, that our views are hardly likely to be the last word on the subject, and that others may have insights that have escaped our attention. Intellectual honesty will motivate us to admit to ourselves that the evidence is not as compelling as we might hope, that newly uncovered evidence tells against our position, or that we have been investigating a question in the wrong way (Haack, 2008, p. 33). All these virtues help to sustain an open-minded search for truth.

8. The importance of a particular virtue cannot be appreciated if it is confused with some other idea, and open-mindedness has suffered more than many virtues in this respect. One regrettable tendency is thinking of open-mindedness as a kind of tolerant indifference in the face of disagreement. Nicholas Rescher makes a disparaging reference to a "live-and-let-live open-mindedness" (Rescher, 1997, p. 1), and Susan Haack observes that a reluctance to suggest that another person's view is mistaken may perhaps be attributed to "a kindly tolerance and open-mindedness" (Haack, 2008, p. 56). Cautionary quotes need to be employed in both instances, however, because such tolerant indifference in the face of disagreement is very different from the ideal of open-mindedness. On this low redefinition (Edwards, 1965, p. 65), what counts as "open-mindedness" is simply a non-judgmental, hands-off outlook that regards all ideas as equally worthy, none more justified than any other. Borrowing from Michael Lynch, we might think of this conception of "open-mindedness" as the "who's to say" variety (Lynch, 2004, p. 34). Who's to say that one view is better than another? Who's to say that one person's truth claim is superior to another's? An open-minded person will, of course, suspend judgment in specific cases where evidence is absent or inconclusive; but this is quite different from an indiscriminate policy of suspended judgment resulting from a deep skepticism about the very idea of evidence and its role in appraising rival views. If open-mindedness is to flourish, we need to remain clear about the nature of the ideal: receptiveness to ideas must include the critical appraisal of evidence and argument to determine what is worthy of belief.

9. No ideal can flourish if we begin to suspect that it entails consequences that are so harmful that they negate potential benefits, and a doubt of this kind has proved persistent and troubling with respect to open-mindedness. Kurt Baier expresses hesitation in connection with

encouraging in children such open-minded dispositions as holding principles tentatively, listening to the views of others, and changing one's opinions when there are strong contrary reasons:

> Do we know the costs of promoting this ideal? Will people so educated become the sort of indecisive fence-sitters the existentialists claimed many intellectuals tend to be? Will they, by always seeing the reasons on the other side as well as their own, become incapable of commitment to any worthwhile cause or project?" (Baier, 1985, p. 42)

That would be a very regrettable outcome, but there are a number of reasons why such doubts do not undermine the ideal of open-mindedness. First, as Richard Brandt observes, while we always have the option to stop and get more information, such further reflection also has costs associated with it and we may wisely judge that such efforts would not lead to a better outcome than acting on our commitments (Brandt, 1979, p. 272). Second, our review of the reasons for and against our proposed action may have been so thorough that, while we remain ready to consider strong counterarguments should any arise, there is no reasonable prospect of this occurring and no reason to lose faith in our decision. As Russell puts it, we can learn to live with uncertainty without being paralyzed by hesitation (Russell, 1997, p. 221)

10. As we have seen, we cannot hold our beliefs in a dogmatic fashion and at the same time be open-minded with respect to them; dogmatism prevents the kind of reflection and inquiry that open-mindedness welcomes. Some philosophers, however, argue that since it would become increasingly difficult for ideas that conflict with the dominant view to continue to gain a hearing if everyone were open-minded, dogmatism on the part of some members is actually advantageous to a community of inquirers (Adler, 2005, p. 43; Adler, 1999, p. 122; cf. Cohen, 2009, p. 58). The reason is that those dogmatically committed to a minority view are less likely to accede to the view held by the majority with the result, in Mill's words, that the lists are kept open (Mill, 1977, p. 81). The paradoxical implication is that open-mindedness is more likely to flourish in the community as a whole if some members are dogmatic because their stubbornness will increase the likelihood that dissenting views will not be brushed aside. It is crucial to this argument, however, that those who cling dogmatically to a minority view not be seen as "cranks or contrarians" (Adler, 2005, p. 43), since that would ensure that they would be regarded as irrelevant to the discussion. The main problem, therefore, is to see how this outcome is to be avoided. If to be dogmatic means "to hold on to a position, despite the presentation of serious objections and evidence opposing it" (Adler, 1999, p. 121), it

seems inevitable that such a stance will eventually be seen, and rightly so, as refusing to listen seriously to counterargument. The result is that dogmatists will simply be ignored and their intransigence will do nothing to foster inquiry. What is more likely to preserve a diversity of ideas and help open-mindedness to flourish is that minority views be defended vigorously and determinedly but not in closed-minded fashion. It was such tenaciousness not dogmatism that ensured that Alice Stewart's controversial claims in epidemiology were not swept aside despite widespread initial skepticism (Greene, 1999, p. 90). Dogmatic allegiance would not have helped.

I have suggested some ways in which open-mindedness might be helped to flourish but we should not underestimate its elusive character. Faced with ideas that conflict with apparently secure and cherished beliefs, or are at odds with what we were hoping or expecting to find, the virtue of open-mindedness is capable of making demands that we are unable or unwilling to meet. It means being prepared to consider objections to an opinion in which we have much invested, to admit that an unwelcome conclusion has been established, and to accept that a view that seemed to be settled needs to be revised or even rejected. In this way, open-mindedness acknowledges our own propensity to error, and challenges the kind of intellectual arrogance that views further reflection and inquiry as pointless. Such an outlook means that we must be willing to tolerate uncertainty with respect to our own beliefs and move beyond the comfort zone of our personal convictions and preferences. We must be ready to examine and consider evidence that might be relevant to the matter at hand in an impartial manner especially when there are reasons why we might want to resist such inquiry; and we need to be receptive to new ideas whenever a critical review of evidence indicates that the ideas in question have merit. All of this is difficult but as Spinoza (1959, p. 224) reminds us, all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.

Notes

This is the final paper in a trilogy. The previous papers are:
1. "Why open-mindedness matters," *Think* 13, 2006: 7-15.
2. "What open-mindedness requires," *Skeptical Inquirer* 33,1, 2009: 36-39.

[1] Contrary to what some have claimed (Riggs, 2010, p. 179), this account of open-mindedness does not make it simply *equivalent* to being intellectually virtuous. Clearly, a person who meets the criteria for being open-minded could nevertheless be deficient in humility, accuracy, circumspection, tenacity, clarity,

subtlety, imagination, critical ability, and a host of other intellectual virtues. It is passing strange for Riggs to suggest that my account of open-mindedness leaves nothing else to be said about the quality of a person's reasoning. (For a sense of the wide range of intellectual virtues, see Cooper, 1994, to whom I am indebted.) It is also clear that my account does not imply that mistakes in reasoning, such as being unable to keep all the relevant evidence in mind at once, amount to a failure of open-mindedness (Riggs, 2010, p. 179). Riggs fails to acknowledge that I say explicitly that the ability to get results is not a necessary condition of open-mindedness (Hare, 1979, p. 8). In the example Riggs provides, what is lacking is the ability to retain and deploy evidence appropriately but that has no tendency to show that the person lacks that willingness to respect evidence that is characteristic of open-mindedness (cf. Hare, 1979, p. 12; Hare, 1993, p. 89; Hare, 2003, p. 79). As Harvey Siegel notes, one may reason open-mindedly but badly (Siegel, 2009, p. 31).

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