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Gatekeeping the mind

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ABSTRACT



This paper proposes that we should think of epistemic agents as having, as one of their intellectual activities, a *gatekeeping* task: To decide in light of various criteria which ideas they should consider and which not to consider. When this task is performed with excellence, it is conducive to the acquisition of epistemic goods such as truth and knowledge, and the reduction of falsehoods. Accordingly, it is a worthy contender for being an intellectual virtue. Although gatekeeping may strike one simply as the virtue of open-mindedness, I argue that it is not; gatekeeping does not favor a characteristic disposition to be willing to consider novel or opposing ideas. In fact, being told that an agent is excellent at gatekeeping reveals nothing about how frequently she considers or refuses to consider ideas. This paper will introduce and motivate the notion of gatekeeping, and offer some preliminary arguments in support of its candidacy as an intellectual virtue.

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Introduction

Open-mindedness is often regarded as a paradigmatic intellectual virtue (e.g. Baehr 2011; Montmarquet 1993; Riggs 2010, 2015; Zagzebski 1996). Despite disagreements about its nature, many theorists understand it generally to be the disposition to give novel or opposing viewpoints serious consideration. Doing so, they maintain, increases an epistemic agent's chances of acquiring truth, knowledge and understanding, and reducing and eliminating falsehoods. Open-mindedness's status as an intellectual virtue, however, has been disputed in recent years (e.g. Carter and Gordan 2014; Fantl 2018; Levy 2006). Critics argue that its exercise may not always be conducive to the epistemic agent's goals. Under some contexts, being open-minded can actually lead to a loss of truth or a gain in falsehood. For example, opening up to polemical ideas or

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controversial issues like climate change, no matter how sincerely, can potentially weaken one's epistemic standing if one fails to understand the technical claims or is misled by deceptive ones (Levy 2006).

Defenders of open-mindedness have attempted to answer this challenge (Baehr 2011; Riggs 2010; Kwong 2017). One strategy is to point out that an agent should exercise the trait only when she believes that doing so is likely to bring about truth. In the event that she finds herself in an epistemically unfriendly world, one that is, say, filled with lies and falsehoods, she as an open-minded agent should refuse to consider any ideas in it. Another strategy is to stress that open-mindedness requires its possessor to give novel or opposing ideas *serious consideration*. Baehr, for instance, notes that it can recruit the exercise of other intellectual virtues like objectivity, thoroughness, and perseverance, which traits can help serve as a safeguard against believing in dangerous and deceptive ideas (2011). The effectiveness of these strategies, however, remains contested. According to some critics, the fact that open-mindedness fails to give its possessor 'the competence to adapt successfully across a spectrum of situations' undermines its status as an intellectual virtue (Carter and Gordan 2014, 3). Others have even argued that open-mindedness, in light of its vulnerability, may be an intellectual vice and that closed-mindedness or dogmatism may turn out to be intellectually virtuous (Battaly 2018; Curzer and Gottlieb 2019; Fantl 2018). This position is motivated by the thought that if an agent already possesses truth and knowledge, and wants to preserve them, she will do well *not* to open up to opposing ideas and risk losing her existing beliefs. Instead of engaging with controversial ideas that can weaken her epistemic status, she will be better off deferring to experts and accepting their testimony (Levy 2006). In short, there is virtue in refusing to engage with novel or opposing ideas.

Interestingly, the suggestion that closed-mindedness may be an intellectual virtue faces parallel worries to those about open-mindedness. While a refusal to consider novel or opposing ideas can be epistemically beneficial under certain circumstances, it may not be so under others. Imagine a world where truths are abundant and readily accessible, and lies and falsehoods, absent. In it, an agent should open up to as many ideas as she can to maximize the acquisition of truths. Such an exception would show that closed-mindedness too fails to enable its possessor to adapt across a wide variety of situations, and thus, can be undermined as an intellectual virtue.

Who is right? Is open-mindedness an intellectual virtue, and closed-mindedness, an intellectual vice? Or is the reverse claim true? In this paper, I will offer a surprising answer to these questions. Specifically, I will argue that neither open-mindedness nor closed-mindedness is intellectually virtuous. This is because both traits are too *one-sided* in nature: As their names already suggest, *open*-mindedness is concerned principally with the disposition to *open* up one's mind to consider novel or opposing viewpoints, while *closed*-mindedness, with the disposition to *close* it off. But such a lop-sidedness is precisely the culprit that has led to the above challenges to each trait's claim to be an intellectual virtue. Nevertheless, there ought to be an intellectual virtue the activity of which is to decide which ideas to consider and which ones to refuse to consider; after all, such an exercise is vital to an agent's achieving her epistemic goals. The question is how such a virtue should be construed.

My proposal is this: Keeping in mind the conceptual claim that where there is opening, there *must be* closing, and vice versa, my strategy is to identify a disposition that is concerned with *both* the opening and the closing of one's mind. Think about a door guard of an apartment building. This is a person whose main job is to guard the doors: To open the doors to let certain people in (e.g. occupants and their guests; delivery services) *and* to close them to keep certain people out (e.g. loiterers; thieves) across a variety of contexts (e.g. emergencies due to fire or gas leak). It would be rather odd, even non-sensical, to think of a door guard's job as *exclusively* or *primarily* letting people in or keeping people out. My plan is to push the spatial connotations in *open*-mindedness and *closed*-mindedness a bit further to locate the mental analogue of a door guard, a 'gatekeeper' of the mind, so to speak. Such a mental gatekeeper would have the distinctive intellectual task of guarding or gatekeeping the mind by both letting certain ideas through the mind's 'gates' and keeping others out across a variety of contexts. Conceived thus, I argue that mental gatekeeping (hereafter, gatekeeping) is a worthy contender for being an intellectual virtue because it is, among other things, conducive to the achievement of certain epistemic goals and can be performed with excellence.

The paper will be structured as follows. The first section sets the stage for the idea of mental gatekeeping with a discussion of a party host and an important task that she has to play: to decide by certain criteria which guests to invite and equally important, which *not* to invite. Particular attention will be paid to the conditions under which such a host can be said to excel or fail at this specific task. The second section proposes that we ought to think of the mind as analogous to a party host in

performing the intellectual task of deciding which ideas to give serious consideration to and which, not. It will identify some main aspects of the mental gatekeeping task and lay out some conditions under which its performance can be deemed excellent or poor. The third section will examine some arguments in favor of positing the notion of gatekeeping and its candidacy as an intellectual virtue. As I will argue, not only does doing so avoid some of the criticisms that have been raised against open-mindedness and closed-mindedness as intellectual virtues, but it will also reveal that mental gatekeeping is a natural consequence of recent attempts to defend open-mindedness. The next section will address two likely objections to gatekeeping by defenders of open-mindedness. In the concluding section, I will briefly discuss some of the implications of gatekeeping for both the concepts of open- and closed-mindedness.

Two caveats are in order. First, the notion of gatekeeping already exists in the epistemology literature (e.g. Henderson 2009, 2011; Greco 2015). David Henderson introduced the idea of a 'gate-keeping contextualism', according to which attributions or denials of knowledge serve as epistemic gatekeepers for a spectrum of communities (e.g. from applied to general source groups). To say that someone knows that p , for instance, is to certify her as 'epistemically positioned' with respect to p so as to be a good source of beliefs on it (2009, 120). Such a certification of sources of knowledge, concerned as it is with actionable information, keeps in view and reflects the interests and the stakes of the community, including the attributor and interlocutors. The notion of mental gatekeeping that is the target of this paper, however, is distinct from Henderson's gate-keeping contextualism, having in common only features inherent in the very notion of gatekeeping, namely, to let certain things in and keep others out based on various considerations. The sort of gatekeeping that is discussed below is not concerned with knowledge as an evaluative concept or with ensuring that only qualified epistemic agents serve as sources of true beliefs or knowledge for the community in question. Instead, mental gatekeeping, as I use the term, is centered around individual epistemic agents, and refers to the specific mental task or activity of determining which ideas an agent should let into the mind to consider and which ones to reject. Even if certain ideas are given serious consideration by the agent, they may still be rejected if they are found to be false or otherwise suspect. A central goal of this paper is to establish that this mental activity, when performed with excellence, is a viable candidate as an intellectual virtue.

Second, this paper takes a roughly ‘responsibilist’ approach to intellectual virtues in treating these as character traits that bear on their possessor’s worth or excellence, and are conducive to the attainment of epistemic goods such as truth, knowledge and understanding (Baehr 2015). It assumes that intellectual virtues have a motivational component in that their possessors must be motivated to perform some distinct intellectual activity out of a love or desire for epistemic goods. However, it remains neutral on the issue of whether there must also be a success component. Nevertheless, the ensuing discussion regarding the truth-conduciveness of open-mindedness and closed-mindedness, which is germane to the case for mental gatekeeping, is one that should concern all virtue epistemologists regardless of where they stand on the issue. Thus, those who require a success component (e.g. Zagzebski) must demonstrate that exercises of intellectual virtues are actually truth-conducive. But those who reject it (e.g. Montmarquet 1993; Baehr 2007; Watson 2015) still need to show why they have reasons to believe that such exercises are conducive to the attainment of truth (Baehr 2011). Moreover, as Baehr argues, although reliability is not an ‘essential or defining’ feature of an intellectual virtue, it is still a *necessary* feature: It must be robust enough in such a way that it is efficacious, under suitable environments, as ‘an effective means to the goal or end proper to the virtue in question’ (2007, 468). As we will soon see, some of the criticisms raised against open-mindedness’s truth-conduciveness not only undermine our reasons for thinking that it is conducive to the truth, but are also applicable in environments commonly considered ‘suitable’. Challenges to the truth-conduciveness of open-mindedness (and of closed-mindedness) therefore are of concern to virtue epistemologists of all stripes.

The party host

Lyle and Shaina want to throw a party to welcome the new year. They want it to be a success and a memorable one, especially when they have very much lived a socially isolated life during the COVID pandemic. To this end, an immediate task is for them to work out a guest list – to decide the number of people, and above all, whom to invite. Too many guests will make everyone feel cramped and uncomfortable, while too few will lessen the fun. Also to be considered is how people might feel about gatherings during a pandemic. Lyle and Shaina have already decided that they would only invite people who are vaccinated and boosted. But some guests may not feel ready for close proximity to

others, especially after they have grown accustomed to social distancing, or may worry about the threat of breakthrough infection with variants of the virus still around. Although their apartment can comfortably fit 15 people, they decide to invite only ten to allow more space for distancing.

But which ten? This is a particularly difficult decision to make because this number is well below what Lyle and Shaina initially had in mind. Apart from several couples whom they hold dear, there are also close friends from work. Shaina's sister and spouse live nearby, and not inviting them is not an option. They also have new neighbors who seem a pleasant and interesting couple. Lyle wants to cultivate their relationship and thinks it a good opportunity to include them. This means that there are now only six remaining spots. Shaina wants to invite her colleague Pierre but feels conflicted because he does not get along with Lyle's friend Simone, whom they both want to have at that party. In the end, they decided not to invite Pierre. And then there is Siobhan. She is the life of any party but on the rare occasion when she has one too many drinks, she becomes rowdy. Given the risk, they decide not to invite her either.

These then are some considerations that Lyle and Shaina have to entertain in planning the party guest list. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to highlight three general observations. The first is that the task to work out the guest list is distinct from the other tasks they have to perform as hosts, such as deciding what foods and drinks to serve (as caterers), what music to play (as DJs), and what games to play (as entertainment managers). Of immediate and primary importance, of course, is the task of deciding whom to invite and whom *not* to invite, in light of all relevant considerations (e.g. space, COVID, and sociability). The second is that how well they perform this last task has a direct bearing on whether or not the party will be a success. Lyle and Shaina have to invite the *right* number of people as well as the *right* people. Failing to do either could mean a serious setback, even a disaster. The third observation is that Lyle and Shaina can *excel* (or fail) at the task of deciding whom to invite and not to invite. By no means a complete list, the following are some important considerations that they would have to bear in mind and expertly handle:

- (a) The host should have a clear sense of what the party's purpose is. Knowing it sets the criteria for determining whether it will be a success and whom to invite or not to invite. In the example, Lyle and Shaina intend to have a small party to ring in the new year

and will invite only *some* of their close friends and relatives, and not others. Were the party to celebrate something else, say, Lyle's birthday, the guest list might look very different and consist mostly of people whom Lyle would want to be there. If Shaina invited only her friends to it, Lyle would have a good reason for complaint.

- (b) The host should have a good idea of how the invited guests will contribute to the goal of the party. For the gathering to be enjoyable and memorable, the guests should consist of people whom Lyle and Shaina consider good company and who are the sociable type. This is why they did not invite Siobhan. Although she is a good friend, her tendency to get rowdy when she is intoxicated can potentially spoil the atmosphere and disrupt the party. Lyle and Shaina do not want that to happen.
- (c) The host should take into account contingent factors and accommodate them. The pandemic is one such factor, which results in Lyle and Shaina's decision to reduce the number of party guests from 15 to 10, and invite only those who are vaccinated and boosted. Another example of a contingent factor is: All things considered, Siobhan is not a suitable guest for Lyle and Shaina's small gathering on New Year's Eve during a pandemic. But were they to find out that she would soon be moving overseas, they might well decide to invite her in the end; after all, they still regard Siobhan as a good friend. Even with her inclusion, they still feel good about the chances for the party to be a success.
- (d) The guest list should reflect the host's budget for the party and other available resources allocated for it. Lyle and Shaina decided to invite only 10 people because that number was all they could comfortably accommodate given the size of their apartment in a pandemic. Moreover, if they were to decide to treat their guests to fine cuisine, they might further reduce that number so as to procure more exquisite foods and drinks, and perhaps include friends known for their culinary knowledge and taste.

No doubt there can be additional considerations that are relevant to deciding whom to invite and whom to exclude. My aim here is simply to give a rough sense of the kinds of consideration that a party host must take into account and successfully negotiate in order to excel in making these decisions. Notice, however, that being excellent at this task does not necessarily guarantee that the party will be a success, if, for instance, food poisoning occurs. Were that to happen, Lyle and

Shaina could still be regarded as being excellent at the task of deciding the party guest list but poor at the task of catering. Conversely, making poor decisions about whom to invite or exclude could still result in a successful party. If more guests showed up than originally planned to cramp the indoor space, Lyle and Shaina might decide to have a karaoke party on the patio and encourage people to participate in hopes to free up some room inside the apartment. In such a case, Lyle and Shaina could still be criticized for the guest list but praised for their resourceful response to contingency.

The gatekeeper of the mind

Can we think of the mind as playing a similar task as that of the party host above, namely, deciding the guest list? Put another way, can we think of an epistemic agent as having, as one of her intellectual activities, a task that is analogous to deciding whom to invite and not to invite to the party? In this and the next section, I propose that we can. Just as a party host has to decide, in light of certain goals, whom to invite or exclude, an epistemic agent has to perform a similar task, namely, the intellectual activity of deciding, in light of certain epistemic goals, which ideas to consider and which ones to exclude. In this way, this mental analogue – a ‘minder of the mind’s gates’, so to speak, performs, much like Lyle and Shaina do in the example, a *gatekeeping* function: Its principal responsibility is to gatekeep the mind by letting certain things in *and* keep certain things out. My suggestion is that an epistemic agent can acquire and cultivate a disposition to perform this distinct intellectual activity and excel in it.

A caveat is in order. My discussion below will frequently use expressions like ‘the mind’s gatekeeper’ and ‘the mind opens up or closes its gates to incoming ideas’. These are intended to be taken metaphorically and should not be thought of as making dubious ontological claims; the mind, for instance, does not literally have gates, let alone a keeper of them. These expressions will be better understood as an extension of the spatial connotations inherent in ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘closed-mindedness’, which convey, respectively, that the mind can open and close with respect to ideas, comparable to a door or gate in the physical realm. In this respect, the very notion of a mental gatekeeper is arguably already presupposed in the discussion of open- and closed-mindedness; it differs from them in emphasizing *both* functions of a gate, namely, the opening *and* the closing, without favoring either

function. An important theme of this paper, however, is that there is much merit in thinking of the mind specifically as having gates, that is, mechanisms to allow it both to open *and* close. To develop and emphasize this theme, I will therefore use the above metaphorical expressions somewhat liberally in what follows. Suffice it to note that all of these expressions can be rephrased in unproblematic and uncontentious ways. Thus, the sentence 'the mind should open up its gates to grant entry to idea *x*' can be rephrased simply as 'the epistemic agent should consider idea *x*'. Similarly, 'the mind's gatekeeper' and cognate expressions can be reformulated as ones about the epistemic agent playing a gatekeeping function to decide whether or not to consider an idea. These statements are about epistemic agents and an intellectual activity that they can perform, and as such, are unproblematic. 'Mind' and 'epistemic agent' will also be used interchangeably below.

To highlight what a mental gatekeeper ('gatekeeper', hereafter) does, it is instructive to bear in mind the analogy of Lyle and Shaina's roles as party hosts. First, gatekeeping is a task that is distinct from other mental tasks; it is the unique intellectual activity of deciding when to open up the mind's gates to a novel or an opposing idea, and equally importantly, when *not* to do so. And it performs this task with the aim of achieving the epistemic goals of acquiring truth, knowledge, and understanding, and reducing or eliminating falsehoods. Given that this paper takes a responsibilist line and assumes that intellectual virtues are character traits, we can think of a person who possesses gatekeeping as an intellectual virtue as someone who characteristically performs this distinctive activity with competence (more on this below). Moreover, she is motivated to do so out of a desire or love for the aforementioned epistemic goods. Second, how well the mental gatekeeper does its job has a direct impact on whether these goals are achieved. Briefly, letting in too many or too few ideas or letting in the wrong ideas could cause the mind to believe falsehoods or to reject truths. The key, then, is for the gatekeeper to open up the mind's gates to the right number of ideas as well as the right sort of ideas for the mind to consider.

Third, the gatekeeper can excel in the task of deciding when to open or close the mind's gates. A helpful way to think about excellent gatekeeping is to think in contrast to all the ways in which it can fail to attain. To pursue the gate metaphor, the gatekeeper can (a) leave the gates open at all times such that the mind gives every incoming idea consideration and in doing so, risks letting out believed truths; (b) keep the gates closed at all times such that the mind never considers any novel ideas, and in doing

so, retains believed falsehoods; (c) fail to open the gates *wide enough* for certain ideas to get through so that the mind cannot consider them or do so adequately; (d) open the gates and welcome ideas it should not consider; and/or (e) close the gates to ideas it should consider. Plausibly, a gatekeeper who makes mistake (a) or (b) is incompetent at its job, as is one who consistently errs with respect to (c), (d) or (e).¹ To fail in any of these ways would frustrate the epistemic agent's goal of acquiring truth and knowledge, and reducing and eliminating falsehoods. For example, letting the mind consider dangerous and deceptive ideas may result in the abandonment of truth for falsehood. By contrast, a gatekeeper who never makes any of these mistakes can be considered to excel at her task: It would be excellent in gatekeeping the mind by letting in only an *appropriate* number of *appropriate* ideas for it to consider and turning away all inappropriate ones.

Before tackling the thorny issue of what 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' entails, it is important to note that excellent gatekeeping *by itself* does not necessarily lead to the attainment of the epistemic agent's goals, nor does poor gatekeeping, to their frustration. To illustrate, suppose an epistemic agent comes across an idea from a trustworthy source that challenges her beliefs and she has the requisite background knowledge and reasoning ability to examine and assess it. On these grounds, she, as gatekeeper, *should* open up the gates to consider this idea. However, it is possible that she, the epistemic agent, can make a reasoning mistake and end up rejecting the idea as false when it is in fact true. In such a case, the fault lies *not* with the gatekeeper but with that part of the mind responsible for examination and assessment. After all, the gatekeeper does her job – excellently, in fact – by granting entry to an idea that *should* be considered. Conversely, suppose the gatekeeper opens up the gates to an idea that the mind should not consider, say, a baseless or deceptive claim that comes from a questionable source. In the event that the mind ends up rejecting the idea as false – after its faculties to examine and assess have processed it – the gatekeeper could still be faulted and criticized for having made a poor decision; it let in something that it should not have, and subjected the agent to undue and unnecessary epistemic risk. These cases notwithstanding, excellent gatekeeping is still conducive to the agent's achieving her epistemic goals, and poor gatekeeping, not: Opening up the mind's gates to only appropriate

¹It is also plausible that when an epistemic agent commits mistakes (b), (c) and (e), she is being 'too guarded', whereas when she commits mistakes (a) and (d), she is not being sufficiently 'guarded' (or on guard).

ideas and an appropriate number increases the agent's chances of acquiring truth and knowledge, and reducing falsehoods.

Let us now examine what this entails. Recall that Lyle and Shaina could invite only 10 guests in light of the size of their apartment and of the pandemic; any more or any less people would threaten to ruin their party. The parallel concern here for the gatekeeper is to let in the *right number* of ideas for the mind to consider. Letting in too many at any given time would cause the mind to give insufficient attention and care to them, thereby potentially leading it to reject truths and accepting falsehoods. Letting too few or none in would frustrate the realization of the goal of acquiring truths and knowledge, especially when the ideas come from a trusted source and require minimal cognitive effort to process. Of course, it is highly doubtful that an exact number can be specified as *the* optimal amount of ideas that the mind should consider at any given time; this number may vary not only among epistemic agents but also within an individual agent (more on this shortly). However, it is not necessary to specify one in order to make sense of the general idea that the mind works best when it is engaged with a manageable number of ideas, where manageability is understood and measured in terms of competency.

This number can be affected by two further concerns. The first has to do with the nature and content of the prospective idea to be considered. Simple ideas or those with which the agent has great familiarity, for instance, require less cognitive effort to examine and assess, in which case the gatekeeper may be inclined to let more in. By contrast, complex and difficult ideas, or ones of which the agent is ignorant, are much more time-consuming and require a sustained intellectual effort, in which case the gatekeeper would be prudent not to permit more to enter the mind's gates. The second has to do with contingent factors that can affect the agent's cognitive performance. An agent who is extremely anxious, say, from worrying about a parent's health or entering the job market, is unlikely to have much mental room to tackle any unrelated matters. A gatekeeper who is excellent at her task would register the agent's mental state, and make necessary adjustments in its gatekeeping decisions. Thus, if an idea appearing at the mind's gates is not urgent but is of a kind that would normally be let in for consideration, the gatekeeper may well decide to refuse to open up, knowing in advance that the agent may not be competent enough at that time to assess it. By contrast, an agent who finds herself in a mentally robust state can entertain all sorts of ideas. A gatekeeper can thereby accommodate accordingly.

Also relevant to deciding whether to let in certain ideas for consideration are factors related to the agent's resources, much like Lyle and Shaina's guest list had to be tailored to their food and drink budget. As noted, attention and time are some of the crucial resources that the gatekeeper uses to determine the capacity that the mind has to consider ideas. There are others, which include but are not limited to the epistemic agent's background knowledge and expertise, reasoning abilities, biases and prejudices, and interests. Thus, if the agent is exposed to a controversial and technical idea about which she knows very little, and she lacks the desire to acquire the necessary knowledge to assess it, the gatekeeper should refuse to admit this idea into the mind for consideration. To do otherwise would force a half-hearted attempt by the agent to understand the idea, causing her potentially to either reject it prematurely or accept it on insufficient grounds. It would therefore be epistemically better for the agent, in light of her epistemic goals, if the gatekeeper refused to grant entry to this idea at this time; perhaps it could reconsider this decision later when the agent develops a concern for and interest in the issue, and is willing to acquire the requisite background knowledge.² Similarly, if the agent is aware that she has a particular bias, say, against social justice claims, and has a tendency to make mistakes assessing them, the gatekeeper should refuse to let these ideas in for the agent to consider *by herself*. Again, to do otherwise would frustrate the agent's epistemic goal of acquiring truths and eliminating falsehoods.

Why gatekeeping?

The foregoing discussion should give readers a rough sense of what a mental gatekeeper does, and what makes it an excellent one.³ No doubt there is more to say about its nature, as well as other sorts of considerations that ought to be taken into account in deciding whether to open or close the mind's gates. However, these details must be reserved for a later occasion. Suffice it for now to identify some reasons as to why we should think of the mind as having a gatekeeper (or playing a

²In this scenario, we can praise the agent for making an excellent gatekeeping decision (i.e. virtuous gatekeeping) but criticize her for not having an interest in the idea or a desire to look into it (especially when it is one in which she *ought* to be interested in or which she *should* pursue. In such a case, she may be viciously indifferent). Such a lack in interest is *not* the fault of the gatekeeper but some other part of the epistemic agent. Indeed, the gatekeeper's decision can be deemed excellent precisely *because* it is made with the awareness that the agent lacks such an interest in the idea, and that were she to consider it, she would not be able to do so adequately.

³Following Baehr (2015), we can treat the previous section as addressing the competence, judgment, and motivational dimensions of gatekeeping.

gatekeeping function). In my view, the most important point about mental gatekeeping is that it is constituted by the intellectual activity of opening *and* closing the mind's gates to novel or opposing ideas for consideration. This is perhaps as it should be, since the very nature of gates is such that they open *and* close. No gates just open or just close; otherwise, they would not be gates. The gatekeeper's job, then, is to guard these gates – to decide when to open and close them, and determine which ideas to let in or shut out. As I will argue below, these seemingly trivial claims about gates and gatekeeping have surprising implications, the most important of which is this: Gatekeeping is a far more suitable candidate for intellectual virtue than open-mindedness. Indeed, its very nature can accommodate the benefits of open-mindedness, but avoid its difficulties.

Recall that talk about mental gatekeeping can readily be derived from the existing discussion on open- and closed-mindedness. If we construe open-mindedness roughly as the disposition to open up the mind to consider novel and opposing ideas and closed-mindedness, as the disposition to close the mind off to them, we see that mental gatekeeping, which entails the performance of *both* of these intellectual functions, is in close conceptual proximity to both. To reiterate, its unique intellectual activity is to 'mind the mind's gates', that is, to guard the mind by opening *and* closing with respect to incoming ideas. Accordingly, gatekeeping, open-mindedness and closed-mindedness are all within the same vicinity, concerned as they are with the *same* mental function of what the mind does with these ideas. As such, gatekeeping has just as much claim to be an intellectual virtue as open- and closed-mindedness. The present inquiry, then, has to do with how best to understand the nature of such a function and whether it is intellectually virtuous. A crucial aspect to this is that one cannot talk about opening without also talking about closing, and vice versa, and it is clear that the notions of open-mindedness and closed-mindedness are flawed at the outset in being too one-sided, given that each is concerned only with one of the operations of the mind's gates (i.e. its opening or closing, respectively), or in overemphasizing its favored operation. Such a one- or lop-sidedness is clearly reflected by the fact that '*open-mindedness*' and '*closed-mindedness*' contain the very word that designate the relevant central operation in question.

Take open-mindedness first. In the literature, most discussions of open-mindedness construe it as a disposition to be willing and able to open up one's mind to give novel ideas or challenges serious consideration. Some

theorists have argued that an open-minded person should consider *every* idea that comes her way, however trivial (Curzer and Gottlieb 2019; Battaly 2018), while others have claimed that open-mindedness incurs on its possessor an active duty to seek out opposing viewpoints (Levy 2006). These specific claims notwithstanding, the open-minded agent is often presented as someone who tends to be, or is characteristically, willing to open up her mind to consider novel or opposing ideas. It may be objected that such a characterization describes *not* an open-minded person but a gullible one; after all, gullibility is usually held to be the vice of excess vis-à-vis open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue. We should, however, resist this objection. A person who has a tendency to open up her mind to incoming ideas is not necessarily one who has a tendency to *believe* them. A person with the former tendency may give these ideas serious and careful consideration but reject them if she finds them to be false. Opening up to ideas is thus *not* the same as believing them; *consideration* is not the same as *acceptance*. A gullible person is someone who tends to *believe* every idea that comes her way and has a mind that is so open that ‘her brains fall out’ (the implication being that incoming ideas manage to find a home by pushing existing beliefs out). The person who merely has the tendency to open her mind up to incoming ideas is not guilty of such an intellectual flaw; instead, she is more appropriately described as being open-minded, still a flaw, as I will argue, but one that is distinct from gullibility.⁴

Open-mindedness’s one-sided disposition to be willing to open up one’s mind to consider novel or opposing ideas is precisely the main reason for the objections that have been raised against its status as an intellectual virtue. Perhaps the most damaging criticism is that such a disposition under certain contexts, e.g. in an epistemically hostile environment, may *not* be conducive to the acquisition of truth and knowledge but pave the way for deceptive ideas that threaten to replace believed truths with falsehoods.⁵ In these contexts, critics argue that an epistemic

⁴A tentative conclusion that may be drawn from this discussion is that theorists may be mistaken to situate open-mindedness between the vices of gullibility and closed-mindedness. Given that consideration of an idea is distinct from its acceptance, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of there being two separate virtues corresponding to each activity. My present claim is that the virtue pertaining to the consideration of ideas is gatekeeping.

⁵Variations of this objection include the following: That agents should not be open-minded about controversial ideas which they lack the expertise to assess (e.g. Levy), that our current world, filled as it is with fake news, lies, misleading claims and bullshit, is in fact epistemically hostile, and that they should not be open to any ideas that challenge their existing body of knowledge (e.g. Fantl). Although this objection against the truth-conduciveness of open-mindedness is often directed at those who construe intellectual virtues as having a success component, it can easily be modified and adapted to apply to those who do not. For instance, it can be presented as *reasons* as to why an epistemic agent should *not*

agent is better off being closed-minded or dogmatic so as to prevent the acquisition of falsehoods and loss of truths. In response to these objections, defenders of open-mindedness have argued that there are circumstances under which a person should *not* be open-minded. As noted above, Baehr claims that a person should give opposing or novel ideas serious consideration only when she believes that there is a good chance that doing so will lead to the acquisition of truth (2011). Similar concerns have led Riggs to make the claim, somewhat awkwardly, that a person can refuse to consider an idea ‘in an open-minded way’ (2010). Hedging claims like these therefore reflect that open-mindedness does not always entail an indiscriminate disposition to open the mind up to ideas, that there is some room to talk about its closing. These attempts to defend open-mindedness, however, have had limited success. Some critics continue to press the criticism that anytime a person refuses to consider *any* idea – whether it is due to her judgement that doing so is unlikely to lead to truth or to her lacking the time to give it proper assessment – she is failing to be open-minded or is in fact being closed-minded (Curzer and Gottlieb 2019; Battaly 2018). Others have pointed out that since open-mindedness is truth-conducive only under certain, and therefore limited, circumstances, and intellectual virtues are supposed to ‘afford a person the competency to adapt to a wide variety of circumstances’ (Carter and Gordan 2014), it thus cannot be an intellectual virtue.

My contention is that mental gatekeeping can avoid these kinds of objections and criticisms. The reason is simple: It does not privilege the disposition to open the mind’s gates to consider ideas. Its principal intellectual task is to *mind the mind’s gates*, which by its very nature is constituted by the intellectual activity of deciding, in light of the agent’s epistemic goals, when to open the mind’s gates and when to close them to incoming ideas.⁶ Its decisions, as we have seen, are based on considerations related to the availability and quality of the agent’s cognitive resources, such as mental space, reasoning and other intellectual abilities, and relevant contingent factors. Accordingly, to do its job excellently, this might mean that the gatekeeper will occasionally decide to shut the

think that open-mindedness is effective at attaining truth. In such a case, a truth-desiring person would not desire to be open-minded, as it would not reflect well on her intellectual character.

⁶In light of the fact that gatekeeping privileges neither the opening nor the closing of the mind’s gates, it should, following the vocabulary of open- and closed-mindedness, perhaps be described *without* the spatial qualifier, something like *mindedness*. In my view, such a term is too broad, and seems to suggest a general disposition to use one’s mind (as opposed to being mindless). This is why I have chosen to call the virtue gatekeeping, which directs attention to the specific activity of deciding when and to what to open up the mind’s gates.

mind's gates to *all* incoming ideas for an extended period of time if it deems the agent incompetent to consider and assess them, or if it finds that she is in an epistemically hostile environment. However, it might also mean that it will, on other occasions, decide to open the mind's gates indiscriminately to all incoming ideas for consideration if it judges that the agent is in a peak mental state and can give all of these ideas serious and careful consideration, or if it finds that she is in an epistemically friendly environment. Importantly, both of these decisions fall within the spectrum of possible *excellent* choices that a gatekeeper could make. These choices are excellent because they contribute, *in light of the agent's condition and environment*, to her epistemic goal of acquiring truths and knowledge and reducing falsehoods.

The benefit of this formulation is that gatekeeping *can* afford the agent the competency to adapt to a wide variety of circumstances. Unlike open-mindedness, it does not need to 'shut down' or be suspended whenever an agent finds herself in an epistemically hostile environment; it remains active and operational, and prescribes the appropriate course of action, which in this case is closing the mind's gates. This is because *closing* is part and parcel of gatekeeping, and neither it nor the opening of the gates is privileged as a favored predisposition, unlike *open*-mindedness and *closed*-mindedness. In the absence of a lopsided focus on either disposition, gatekeeping is thus free of the worry that there are situations in which it should not be exercised, and steers clear of all of the above criticisms against open-mindedness. Put succinctly, the mind *always* needs to be guarded.

By parity of reasoning, gatekeeping can also avoid criticisms that may be directed at closed-mindedness. Some of the above difficulties associated with open-mindedness have led critics to conclude that closed-mindedness or dogmatism may be an intellectual virtue (e.g. Battaly 2018; Fantl 2018; Levy 2006; Curzer and Gottlieb 2019). The disposition to close off one's mind to consider incoming ideas, especially controversial ones which an agent lacks the expertise to assess, can prevent a person from acquiring falsehoods and losing truth, and so, is conducive to her epistemic goals. However, as noted in the introduction, these same difficulties can be modified and turned into objections against closed-mindedness. For instance, instead of appealing to epistemically hostile environments, one can simply point to epistemically friendly ones where ample truths abound and are easily accessible, whereas falsehoods are completely absent. Under such a scenario, the agent would *not* be virtuous in being close-minded, for to be so would result in her missing

out on truths. This would mean that closed-mindedness also fails to afford its possessor the competency to adapt to a wide variety of circumstances, and so, cannot be an intellectual virtue. Crucially, gatekeeping can easily eschew these worries. This is again because gatekeeping is constituted by *both* the opening and closing of the mind's gates, and privileges neither disposition. If it finds that the agent is in an epistemically friendly environment, it will prescribe that she open up her mind's gates to take in every idea for consideration. In this way, gatekeeping remains operational as an intellectual virtue and thus avoids the criticism.

In short, mental gatekeeping can sidestep the different worries that have been raised about open- and closed-mindedness. It can do so because it favors neither the disposition to open up the mind's gates nor the contrary disposition to close them. Here is a telling way to demonstrate its neutrality: If we are told that an epistemic agent is an excellent mental gatekeeper (or that she excels in the gatekeeping function), we would thereby know *nothing* about how frequently she opens or closes the mind's gates to incoming ideas. All we know is that she opens and closes them in an *appropriate* manner. This is as it should be, since the decision to open or close must reflect the agent's condition and environment, which can vary, sometimes drastically, from moment to moment. The fact that gatekeeping is adaptive in this way thus makes it a more suitable candidate for intellectual virtue than open-mindedness with respect to the function of what to do with incoming ideas.

Two objections

To further motivate and defend gatekeeping, and to elucidate its nature, this section will consider two objections that a defender of open-mindedness might make against gatekeeping. The first objection is that gatekeeping *just is* virtuous open-mindedness. According to it, an agent who possesses open-mindedness as a virtue is not someone who is willing to consider every idea that she comes across, much as a person who is virtuously courageous is not someone who faces every danger she encounters. Those who maintain otherwise, i.e. that open-mindedness entails a willingness to consider *every* idea, are therefore simply mistaken. Instead, the objection presses an earlier point that a virtuously open-minded person will judge that there are circumstances in which she should be unwilling to consider certain ideas (e.g. in an epistemically unfriendly environment). As such, virtuous open-mindedness makes allowance for both the opening and the closing of the mind's gates.

Insofar as this allowance is what lends gatekeeping its advantage, the objection thus concludes that gatekeeping is unnecessary.

One way to defuse the objection is to point out that despite granting that the mind can occasionally close its gates, virtuous open-mindedness still favors a disposition for the epistemic agent to open them up to ideas for consideration. This is perhaps unsurprising considering that intellectual virtues are supposed to prevail across a wide variety of contexts for the epistemic benefit of their possessor. In this case, open-mindedness prescribes that an agent should be characteristically disposed to be willing to consider ideas in these varied contexts. A main difference between virtuous open-mindedness and gatekeeping is that the latter does *not* favor such a disposition. It is entirely neutral with respect to whether the mind should open or close its gates to ideas for consideration. Instead, it makes its decision to open or close by considering whether the agent's epistemic state and environment at the time are suitable for giving ideas serious consideration and whether doing so is conducive to her epistemic goals.

What if the defenders continue to press the objection by insisting that virtuous open-mindedness too need not favor the unqualified disposition to open the mind up to ideas for consideration? Such an insistence, in my view, is problematic, for two reasons. The first is that if virtuous open-mindedness does not favor such a disposition, then its being called *open-mindedness* is misleading and the term itself, a misnomer. The more serious difficulty is that such an insistence effectively makes virtuous open-mindedness practically indistinguishable from virtuous closed-mindedness, whose advocates can make a parallel argument that virtuous closed-mindedness can also make allowance for the mind to open up under certain circumstances, and need not favor the predisposition to close. If this is correct, then virtuous open-mindedness and virtuous closed-mindedness would resemble one another as an intellectual activity and would now open up, now close the mind to ideas for consideration.⁷ This surely is an unwelcomed result for either position. Indeed, we can now turn this objection around by observing that it is *less* that gatekeeping just is virtuous open-mindedness but *more* that virtuous open-

⁷There may be cases where virtuous open-mindedness and virtuous closed-mindedness differ in terms of their prescription as to whether or not an agent should consider an idea. As I will shortly argue, I doubt that any discernible dispositions can be extracted from these prescriptions to warrant a neat separation between virtuous open-mindedness and virtuous closed-mindedness. Given that the decision whether to open up the mind to consider certain ideas or to shut them is based on a myriad of contingent factors related to the agent's epistemic condition and environment, an insistence on any particular disposition will likely, in my view, turn out *not* to be conducive to the agent's epistemic goals.

mindedness turns out to be actually gatekeeping.⁸ In short, a dilemma ensues for defenders of open-mindedness: Virtuous open-mindedness either favors the disposition to open or it does not. If it does, then it is *not* gatekeeping but if it does not, then it cannot be distinguished from virtuous closed-mindedness.

The second objection that can be raised against gatekeeping is that an agent *should* have a disposition to open up her mind's gates to ideas for consideration, so long as there is the proviso that closing is sometimes necessary. As many defenders of open-mindedness have pointed out, such a disposition is conducive to the agent's epistemic goals of acquiring truth and knowledge. Since gatekeeping does not privilege this disposition, it is not truth- and knowledge-conducive and therefore, not an intellectual virtue. To neutralize this objection, I contend that gatekeeping is in fact *more* conducive to truth and knowledge than open-mindedness. Recall that the mental gatekeeper's main intellectual activity is to decide whether the agent should open or close the mind's gates. In making this decision, it takes seriously the fact that an agent can give adequate and serious consideration to ideas only under the right conditions and circumstances. Moreover, it recognizes that the obtainment of these conditions and circumstances can be a precarious matter, potentially changing from moment to moment depending on factors both external and internal to the epistemic agent.

Importantly, the kinds of factors that gatekeeping takes into consideration are far more expansive than those that have to date been identified

⁸As mentioned, virtuous open-mindedness is sometimes defended on the grounds that it prescribes an agent to consider ideas only under the right circumstances, and to do so with serious consideration. In light of the foregoing discussion, my contention is that taking this defense fully and seriously leads us to the consequence that virtuous open-mindedness amounts essentially to what I have been calling gatekeeping. This is because there are too many contingent factors to take into consideration in determining what the right circumstances are, so much so that no disposition can be discerned as distinctively open-minded in nature. This defense of virtuous open-mindedness is thus not mistaken but it does come at the cost of sacrificing what is supposedly distinct about open-mindedness. Incidentally, this observation that virtuous open-mindedness and virtuous closed-mindedness essentially boil down to mental gatekeeping can serve as an independent source to help clarify gatekeeping's nature and bolster its candidacy as an intellectual virtue. This is because some of the reasons one might have to think of open-mindedness as a candidate for virtue – its value, motivational component, affect dimension – can be extended to apply to mental gatekeeping. For example, suppose someone thinks that possessing open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue requires that the relevant intellectual activity be performed with pleasure. There is no reason to think that this claim about the affect dimension of open-mindedness cannot be applied to mental gatekeeping: To possess gatekeeping as an intellectual virtue, a person must take pleasure in minding the mind's gates (i.e. in opening and closing them in the pursuit of various epistemic goals). As another example, suppose someone thinks that open-mindedness contributes to overall personal worth or excellence because it is, say, a trait that a truth-desiring person would want to possess. Again, there is no reason why the same cannot be said about gatekeeping; indeed, if this paper's line of reasoning is correct, the person who desires truth should prefer it over open-mindedness.

by defenders and critics of open-mindedness. In determining whether an agent should consider a novel or opposing idea, these latter theorists have primarily been concerned with the agent's epistemic environment and her background knowledge and expertise. By contrast, gatekeeping broadens these concerns to include *any* consideration, however contingent it may be, that has a bearing on the epistemic agent's ability to give an idea serious and adequate consideration, like her physical and mental health, personality, personal and epistemic interests, intellectual virtues and vices, etc. Thus, it matters to the gatekeeper if the agent suddenly lacks confidence in her reasoning abilities, is intellectually timid, or is already preoccupied with engaging another idea, for each of these has a direct impact on the gatekeeper's decision whether to open or close the mind's gates. Its guiding principle can perhaps be characterized as: Given that the epistemic agent is in condition x or environment y , is she likely able to give idea z serious and adequate consideration? If yes, then open the gates; otherwise, shut them. As noted, x and y can span a wide range of factors, many of which are contingent and can vary at any given time. The gatekeeper's task is therefore dynamic in nature in that it must be highly sensitive and attuned to these changes, and make necessary adjustments.

A crucial implication is that no one-size-fits-all *idealized* disposition to open or close the mind's gates will be applicable to all epistemic agents, or for that matter, to *any* individual one. Imposing one, like what open-mindedness prescribes, would necessarily ignore and fail to take into account some of the above considerations that have a bearing on the agent's cognitive abilities, and unduly subject the agent to epistemic risks. This is why an agent, contrary to what the objection maintains, should *not* have a disposition to consider ideas, a disposition that we have seen will not be truth- and knowledge-conducive. Instead, the agent should cultivate a disposition to guard the mind by considering her condition and environment and decide on that basis whether or not to open her mind's gates to ideas for consideration. This is what an excellent gatekeeper possesses, and why gatekeeping is more conducive to truth and knowledge than open-mindedness, and more suitable as a candidate for intellectual virtue.

Conclusion

The central aims of this paper are to argue that we ought to think of the mind as having a gatekeeper, the distinct intellectual task of which is to

open or close the mind's gates to novel or opposing ideas, and that mental gatekeeping is a suitable candidate for intellectual virtue. Using the metaphor of gatekeeping helps to emphasize the fact that gates are entities that can both open *and* close, and that it is the gatekeeper's job to control both. Stripping away the metaphorical language, my position thus boils down to this: We ought to think of epistemic agents as having gatekeeping as a unique intellectual activity, which involves determining when to consider and *equally importantly*, when not to consider, a novel or opposing idea. When this task is performed with excellence, the agent increases her chances of satisfying her epistemic goal of acquiring truth and knowledge, and reducing falsehoods. What it is to excel in gatekeeping is to take into consideration a variety of factors related to the agent's epistemic condition and environment, and determine in light of them whether considering an idea will help attain her epistemic goals. Given the variability of these factors, gatekeeping does not privilege or presume a disposition either to open or close the mind's gates. Instead, it remains neutral, prescribing opening or closing as appropriate.

An important implication of this paper is that open-mindedness, which favors a disposition to open up to novel or opposing ideas, turns out *not* to be a suitable candidate for intellectual virtue. The same conclusion applies to those who have recently argued that closed-mindedness may be intellectually virtuous. In light of this paper's conclusions, what are we to do with the concepts of open- and closed-mindedness? Should we banish them? I do not think so. What I have argued is that having a disposition to open up to ideas is not necessarily conducive to truth and knowledge, which is why we should not cultivate open-mindedness *as a character trait* (*mutatis mutandis* for closed-mindedness). Nevertheless, the concepts of open- and closed-mindedness remain useful as ways to praise or criticize instances of gatekeeping. Thus, if a gatekeeper (a) inappropriately shuts out an idea for the mind to consider, it can be chastised for failing to be open-minded; (b) appropriately shuts out an idea, praised for being closed-minded; (c) appropriately opens up its gates, praised for being open-minded; and (d) inappropriately opens up its gates, criticized for failing to be closed-minded.

Much more undoubtedly can be said about the nature and implications of gatekeeping. For example, taking seriously the idea that gatekeeping is an intellectual virtue offers a new and exciting way to think about related vices, one that deviates from a neo-Aristotelean approach. A gatekeeper can fail at its job by being disposed to open up the gates or to close them, which represent the vices of excess and of deficiency,

respectively. But the gatekeeping metaphor suggests, rather naturally, other ways in which it can fail. As I noted earlier, another way in which it can be poor at its task is if it fails to open the gates *wide enough* for an idea to come through, resulting either in the mind being able to consider only parts of it or not at all. Stretching the gate metaphor in this way therefore allows us to talk about and involve *narrow-mindedness*, a vice that has received little to no attention in the literature. Exactly how gatekeeping relates to the vices of open-, narrow-, and closed-mindedness remains to be seen. And the prospects of construing a virtue that deviates from the excess-deficiency model is exciting. Nevertheless, I believe these are of sufficient interest to be further pursued and explored. However, this would require us to take the idea of gatekeeping seriously, the case for which I hope to have laid out above.

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