Why Open-mindedness Matters

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Open-mindedness involves a readiness to give due consideration to relevant evidence and argument, especially when factors present in the situation tempt one to resist such consideration, with a view to increasing our awareness, understanding and appreciation, avoiding error, and reaching true and defensible conclusions. It means being critically receptive to alternative possibilities and new ideas, resisting inflexible and dogmatic attitudes, and sincerely trying to avoid whatever might suppress or distort our reflections. Open-mindedness is relevant to whatever views we presently hold in the sense that we remain committed to reconsidering them in the light of new questions, doubts, and findings; and it also involves maintaining a certain outlook throughout the entire process of inquiry, whereby we remain willing to accept whatever view proves in the end to have the strongest evidential and reasoned support.

No sooner had philosophy developed into a distinctive form of inquiry in classical times than the attitude of open-mindedness emerged as central to serious philosophical inquiry. To be willing to take relevant evidence and argument into account in reaching our beliefs, even if the conclusion runs counter to what we might wish to be the case or contradicts what we presently believe, is the very attitude implicit in the Socratic ideal of following the argument where it leads. We are to “follow the argument” by refusing to rest content with our present assumptions, however certain they may appear, if further consideration seems warranted; and also by accepting whatever findings result from such inquiry and reflection even if those results are quite unwelcome.

These twin aspects of the ideal reverberate throughout the history of philosophy. Echoes of the Socratic view are heard, for example, in Peirce’s warning against holding that a law or truth has found its last and perfect formulation, and against allowing a preferred conclusion to draw one into sham reasoning. Similarly, Russell maintains that opinions
should be held with a consciousness that new evidence may lead to their abandonment, and he reminds us that our own desires, tastes, and interests must not be thought to provide a key to understanding the world. To follow the argument is to recognize that our views have a tentative and provisional character, and that any further inquiry into these or other ideas must not be forestalled, constrained or shaped by preconceived ideas and wishful thinking.

From its appearance as an intellectual virtue in ancient philosophy, open-mindedness gradually came to be thought of as an ideal for every form of inquiry, and finally emerged in the early twentieth century as a central aim of general education itself as inquiry methods of teaching and learning began to replace authoritarian imposition. Mill anticipated these developments in the middle of the nineteenth century by calling for a kind of teaching that would be characterized by an inquiring, not a dogmatic spirit; but it was primarily as a result of Dewey’s influential conception of education as a continuous process of growth that open-mindedness became essentially linked to the notion of what it is to be an educated person. Russell was equally clear about the central value of open-mindedness in education, famously remarking, in his account of educational aims, that open-mindedness is a quality that will always exist where desire for knowledge is genuine.¹

Regrettably, open-mindedness has now fallen on hard times. The intellectual virtue that had been generally seen throughout the history of philosophy as absolutely central to inquiry, and that had come to be regarded as intimately connected to the ideal of education, is all at once decidedly suspect. There is a hesitancy and a sense of disquiet in the air, and a general feeling that it is no longer clear what the merits of open-mindedness are, if it is a virtue at all. Doubts and reservations arise on either side of a familiar epistemological divide. On the one hand, those who believe that inquiry involves a genuine desire to obtain knowledge now fear that open-mindedness only invites relativism, skepticism and gullibility; on the other hand, those who deeply distrust traditional ideals such as the pursuit of truth, believe that perspectivism and postmodern insights have exposed open-mindedness as largely mythical.
Suspicion, on the one side, is fuelled by the thought that being open-minded means having to regard any and every view as a serious possibility, such as being open-minded about the Loch Ness Monster, as the Smithsonian Institute now suggests. Similarly, messages to students, pasted into biology textbooks in Alabama, urging them to keep an open mind about objections to evolutionary theory that have been answered a thousand times, inevitably begin to undermine the ideal by association. If those who like to think of themselves as open-minded were truly open-minded, one popular complaint runs, would they not embrace the thinking of those who disagree with them? With such an assumption at work, the idea begins to take hold that open-mindedness has no defence against taking nonsense seriously. Popular definitions of open-mindedness in terms of the ready acceptance of new ideas, and scholarly accounts that portray open-mindedness as the acceptance of alternatives, rather than the thoughtful consideration of serious alternatives, also tend to raise the problem of credulity because it cannot help but appear that the critical scrutiny of ideas is being seriously compromised.

A related concern is that open-mindedness involves an inability to adopt and maintain a firm belief. Many philosophers, in fact, take the view that open-mindedness precludes firm belief, and this immediately makes the attitude problematic because firm belief is evidently important in many contexts. Open-mindedness, as a result, inevitably seems to be of doubtful value. Philosophers remind us that we cannot be forever changing our stance, since this would mean that we would abandon a view before there had been time to properly explore and test it. Good ideas would be abandoned before they were given adequate attention or even properly understood; and discoveries that eventually result from researchers sticking doggedly to a line of inquiry despite early, unpromising findings would be lost. A readiness to embrace new ideas seems to undermine appropriate tenaciousness with respect to existing beliefs.

On the other side, open-mindedness has not remained immune from the general skepticism directed at Enlightenment ideals. It is sometimes argued that open-mindedness is quite simply impossible because we cannot make sense of experience without
employing the categories of interpretation and understanding rooted in our historical and cultural context. Even when skeptical objections stop short of asserting that the attitude is impossible, there is an abundance of argument and evidence offered to the effect that open-mindedness is all but illusory given the ubiquitous nature of bias and prejudice, the constraints of established belief, habitual thinking, and unexamined assumptions, and the familiar fact that the quest for power and privilege infiltrates and destroys what is naively described as the search for truth (and too often thought of as the search for Truth).

Psychological studies also support such reservations by casting doubt on the legitimacy and utility of ascribing general traits, such as open-mindedness, given that behaviour seems to depend very much on the particular context.

These muddled objections conspire to block recognition of the great value inherent in an open-minded outlook; they would have much less persuasive force if the characterization of open-mindedness sketched earlier were taken seriously. A number of points are relevant:

(i) open-mindedness is not empty-mindedness, as Dewey observed; it requires attending critically to pertinent evidence and argument and rejecting what is spurious, and is not a matter of giving serious consideration to any and every idea; (ii) open-mindedness towards new ideas does not at all imply that our present views are hesitant and wavering, only that they will need to be revised or rejected if they are found wanting; our present beliefs may be such that we are fully convinced of their truth, but we remain open-minded because we are aware of our own general fallibility with respect to our convictions; (iii) open-mindedness does not oblige us to abandon a line of inquiry in order to pursue some alternative possibility because the value of that alternative does not necessarily outweigh the value of our present inquiry, and we may often judge (with little effort) that the cost of abandoning the work we are engaged on is too great; (iv) the ever-present danger that various factors may undermine our efforts at open-minded inquiry does not show that such attempts never succeed, at least to some degree; indeed the fact that we can point out examples where bias, unexamined assumptions, and a host of other factors distorted our earlier inquiries is itself an indication of some success; (v) the categories we use are not immutable and we can and do raise questions about the
adequacy of the categories available, hence there is no reason to conclude that we are prisoners of the categories we have inherited; (vi) it remains useful and informative to comment on an individual’s general open-mindedness or closed-mindedness if appropriate qualifications with respect to context and degree are made or understood, such as when we remark that a particular teacher tends to be very open-minded when teaching science.

If we can set aside confused views that make it difficult to look on open-mindedness favourably, what can be said more positively about its value? What are the merits and strengths of an open-minded attitude? Why, in short, does it matter?

1. It matters because, as Dewey put it, “we live not in a settled and finished world, but in one which is going on, and where our main task is prospective.” An open-minded outlook is of great value in such a world because it prepares us to expect change, to notice unexpected developments, and to consider new ways of addressing emerging issues and situations. Of course, even a closed-minded person might find it impossible, in the face of dramatic developments, to avoid recognizing that a shift has occurred and that a new approach is required; but it is often easy to slip into denial or to simply fail to see that changes are occurring that call for fresh ideas, and it is here that open-mindedness can serve us well.

2. It matters because we need to be reminded that we often manage to ignore or keep suppressed what in fact we know, with the result that we somehow fail to admit to ourselves what ought to be evident. Open-mindedness serves to keep us alive to the possibility that we are shutting out a conscious awareness of truths that are awkward or problematic. Essentially, this was the point brought home to the audience by Frederick Douglass in his July 4th oration in 1852 when he exposed the remarkable irony of celebrating the principles of freedom and justice enshrined in the Declaration of Independence in a society where three million people were slaves. To be open-minded is to be willing to let what we know, and what is there to be known, enter our consciousness and disturb us into full recognition that certain things are indeed the case.
3. It matters if we are to avoid the situation where what we know, or think we know, prevents us from learning anything further or anything different. There is a well-known human tendency to look for evidence that supports what we already believe and to discount whatever counts against our opinion. In one of his memorable aphorisms, Louis Armstrong observes that “there are some people that if they don’t know, you can’t tell them.” They cannot be told because they don’t want to know, because they think they already know, because they can’t believe that they wouldn’t know (if anyone does), or because what they do know prevents them from adding to or modifying their knowledge. The fact that they can’t be told is an indication of their closed-mindedness; it reveals their unwillingness to consider the possibility that something other than what they presently believe might be true.

4. It matters in the context of controversy where reasonable and conscientious people come to very different conclusions and where agreement remains elusive because judgments differ with respect to the evidence and the criteria that are appealed to by the contending sides. The burdens of judgment, Rawls reminds us, make for controversy even when unreasonable disagreement is not a factor. Such controversies are common in society and they turn on difficult questions relating to knowledge and value in the context of social, moral, scientific, artistic, historical and other issues. Open-mindedness is important because it keeps discussion alive and this holds out the promise that even seemingly intractable issues may be resolved over time. Even where agreement cannot be reached, open-mindedness involves listening to the other person’s position, paying attention to evidence that seems to count against a cherished view, and in this way it is the foundation of tolerance and respect.

5. It matters because it is the possession of this attitude that makes a person someone whose views are worth taking seriously because those views have been formed as a result of taking into account relevant evidence and argument on all sides of the question. Mill remarks that we are only entitled to have confidence in someone’s judgment if they have kept their minds open to criticism and practised the steady habit of correcting their
opinions in the light of discussion and experience. The same point applies to having confidence in our own judgment. As Mill points out, wisdom can be gained in no other way.

6. It matters in the interests of justice if bias, prejudice, and hasty conclusions are to be resisted and prevented from distorting an impartial attempt to establish responsibility. We cannot hope to arrive at a just verdict unless the evidence is examined in an honest and disinterested manner; and we cannot right an injustice unless we are ready to examine, in an unbiased manner, new evidence that might show that an innocent person has been convicted. The ideal of justice means that our minds must not be clouded by assumptions and judgments that are shielded from critical scrutiny, and this ethical obligation makes open-mindedness not merely an ideal for intellectuals and scholars but essential to being a good person and citizen.

7. It matters in the context of teaching if teachers are to set an example of genuine inquiry and open discussion, and thereby create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable in expressing and developing their own ideas. An appreciation of open-mindedness as an ideal will serve to keep teachers alive to the danger of preaching, propaganda, the hidden curriculum, and indoctrination. In an open-minded classroom, students may be able to practice the critical skills of inquiry that will enable them to become independent thinkers.

8. It matters because it is the attitude that enables us to continue to view a desired outcome as possible when its achievement seems all but impossible. It allows us to contemplate some state of affairs as an alternative to the present situation when there is a strong temptation to view the status quo as permanent. Václav Havel speaks of the way in which people in the former Czechoslovakia “had all become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unalterable fact of life.” A few people, of course, kept the dream alive, and managed to resist the seductive “voice of reason” that argued for acquiescence. Havel draws the conclusion that “everything seems to indicate that we
must not be afraid of dreaming the seemingly impossible if we want the seemingly impossible to become a reality.⁴

9. It matters because it is an ideal that helps us to interpret and evaluate other ideals and principles. Open-mindedness confronts fanaticism by encouraging us to ask if one ideal should balance another in a given situation, such as being open to the possibility that mercy should temper justice, or prudence restrain courage; and by encouraging us to ensure that the application of the ideal in a particular context is appropriate. Open-mindedness also fosters an on-going reinterpretation of other ideals that can prevent them from turning into empty slogans.

10. It matters because practices associated with open-mindedness (listening to objections, becoming familiar with a wide range of views, attending to new findings, subjecting our theories to stringent tests, and so on) give us the best assurance of arriving at warranted conclusions. Such dispositions enable us to revise and reject our beliefs if evidence and argument start to tell against them. This is the insight that lies behind Russell’s view, referred to earlier, that open-mindedness will always exist where desire for knowledge is genuine. There can be no guarantees of success; an open-minded outlook may, on occasion, lead us to make poor choices. Our willingness to listen with an open mind to advice about directions for our research may at times lead us astray. Our best efforts at making progress towards defensible views remain provisional and corrigible, but we can aim to diminish error over time and work towards a closer approximation to the truth.⁵

Note
This essay first appeared in Think 13, 2006: 7-15.
4 op. cit. p. 46.
5 Address given to the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society, May 30, 2005, on the occasion of receiving its Distinguished Service Award.