

Open-Mindedness

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I am pleased to have been asked to respond to Rebecca Taylor's clear and well-argued essay on open-mindedness, a clearly central epistemic virtue. I will make three main points in my comments.

First, I take the opposite side from Taylor in a debate about whether open-mindedness is best understood as an attitude toward one's beliefs or as an attitude toward oneself as a believer. Open-mindedness as *an attitude toward one's beliefs* requires a disposition to be willing to seriously engage views that challenge one's current beliefs and understandings. More formally, Jason Baehr puts this requirement as follows: "An open-minded person is characteristically (a) willing and (within limits) able (b) to transcend a default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint."¹ Using Aristotle's schema for moral virtues, open-mindedness as a virtue can be construed as a mean between two extremes. A deficit of open-mindedness is closed-mindedness, which involves a characteristic imperviousness to alternative views. An excess of open-mindedness is captured by Michael Frayn's description of Haugh, a character in his novella *The Tin Men*: "But above all, Haugh had an open mind. It was open at the front, and it was open at the back. Opinions, beliefs, philosophies entered, sojourned briefly, and were pushed out at the other end by the press of incoming convictions and systems."² Being effectively open-minded, then, requires hitting the mean, that is, being neither impervious to other perspectives nor willing to entertain any idea one encounters however bad.

For the most part, Taylor follows Jonathan Adler and Wayne Riggs in seeing open-mindedness as *an attitude toward oneself as a believer* rather than an attitude toward one's beliefs.³ In her dispositional requirement, the open-minded person "is disposed to seek self-knowledge about her cognitive strengths and weaknesses" and "to self-monitor based on this self-knowledge." The concern that led Taylor to endorse this account is an alleged conflict between open-mindedness toward a particular belief and being firmly convinced of that belief. Can I really be open-minded about whether slavery is wrong? To be open-minded toward a particular belief, it is claimed, requires that I must be open to doubt what I otherwise claim to believe and that these are conflicting first order cognitive attitudes. It is as if I said "p, but possibly not p." Thus open-mindedness toward one's beliefs and having firm convictions are incompatible. Since we want students to hold some beliefs firmly, open-mindedness cannot be understood as an attitude toward one's beliefs if it is a suitable virtue to be taught to students.

I am not persuaded by this argument. I grant that there is an ordinary use of having an open mind about a particular claim that makes it incompatible with firm belief. If I say I have an open mind about which candidate to vote for in an upcoming election, I am generally taken to mean that I have not made up my mind yet. And that

state is surely incompatible with at the same time having a firm belief about which candidate I should vote for.⁴ But being an open-minded *person* in the way I previously described is fully compatible with having firm convictions. There is no incompatibility between my holding a belief firmly and at the same time my having a disposition to be receptive to worthy alternative views if I should encounter them. As I have said previously, open-mindedness is a disposition that must be actualized, if it is a virtue, in the right circumstances. Only a person like Haugh would entertain opposing views to any and every proposition. Since I do not accept the alleged problem with viewing open-mindedness as an attitude toward one's beliefs, I am not inclined to adopt the self-regarding solution. Seeking self-knowledge and self-monitoring, the self-regarding dispositions that Taylor describes, are certainly useful in making openness to alternative views cognitively effective, but I am not persuaded that open-mindedness is best understood as an attitude toward oneself.

Second, one difficulty in giving an account of a particular epistemic virtue arises from the unity or mutual support that the epistemic virtues, *qua* virtue, may require. Taylor's "definition of the open-minded agent" includes love of truth and understanding, intellectual humility, cognitive self-knowledge, and self-monitoring, forming beliefs on the basis of available evidence and argument, and intellectual courage. Aristotle famously argued for the "unity" of the moral virtues: one cannot fully possess one of them without having all the others, he thought. While I am doubtful of this thesis concerning the moral virtues, I do think, like Taylor, that the cognitive virtues are closely connected.⁵ Open-mindedness is of little value if it is not coupled with critical capabilities, for example. Frayn says of Haugh that "his intelligence, unhampered by any critical powers, was quick and agile, and he was often convinced by a man's arguments before he had had time to put them."⁶ "Open-mindedness" of that kind would as likely lead away from the truth as toward it, and so is no virtue. Taylor is in my view right to emphasize the relationship between open-mindedness and other epistemic virtues, but I am less persuaded that these virtues should be included as part of the defining conditions of what it is to be open-minded *per se* (although they may be required to make open-mindedness a virtue). If an analysis of any intellectual virtue winds up including, if not all the others, a good portion of them, the point of individual analyses is lost. Each analysis could become equivalent to an account of rationality.

Third, Taylor sees her main contribution as emphasizing the importance of understanding as the cognitive goal where open-mindedness becomes relevant. I think that is right. The charge of being closed-minded does not usually occur with respect to a single proposition taken on its own. Consider the claim that humans are substantial causes of global warming through their burning of fossil fuels. Those who reject that claim typically embed it within a broader framework for understanding social and political issues that may include skepticism about the veracity of scientists, perhaps even doubts about the scientific enterprise itself, or a commitment to small government and a free market. Few of us are capable of making our own evaluations of the evidence concerning global warming, so, as Taylor says, it becomes a question of to whom to grant epistemic authority. Since admitting the

existence of global warming and its human causes would support government intervention, global warming deniers are likely to listen to sources of information that endorse their own values.

Further, the ability to resist belief in global warming despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary is abetted by epistemic deficiencies of our social and political environment.⁷ A politically balkanized media makes it possible for deniers to find “facts” that accord with their views. Even the mainstream, supposedly responsible media gin up controversy where there is none by inappropriate applications of a fairness doctrine that makes them believe they must give due respect to the “opposition.” Moving away from the specific issue of global warming, closed-mindedness about political issues is encouraged by political segregation in where we live and with whom we interact. Speaking only to the like-minded is known by psychologists to reinforce our preexisting views. When the issues in question have to do with social justice, biased views in dominant groups about which groups are to be trusted and accorded epistemic authority not only undermine open-mindedness but lead to active resistance to truth and understanding.⁸

So where does that leave us when it comes to teaching students to be open-minded? We have to acknowledge that open-mindedness is not simply an individual intellectual disposition, I think. Rather its possibilities are rooted in a broader culture that brings moral and political virtues into play as well. I am concerned that the virtue approach seems to focus on individuals. I think we need to expand that focus to the broader social context.

1. Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152.

2. Michael Frayn, *The Tin Men* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1966), 66.

3. Jonathan Adler, “Reconciling Open-Mindedness and Belief,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 2 (2004): 127–142; Wayne Riggs, “Open-Mindedness,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, no. 1/2 (2010): 172–188.

4. This distinction is made by Peter Gardner in “Should We Teach Children to be Open-Minded? Or, is the Pope Open-Minded about the Existence of God?,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 27, no. 1 (1993): 42.

5. On the unity of the cognitive virtues see: Baehr, *Inquiring Mind*, 65–67; Alvin I. Goldman, “The Unity of the Epistemic Virtues,” in *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, eds. Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zgzebski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 30–48; James S. Spiegel, “Open-Mindedness and Intellectual Humility,” *Theory and Research in Education* 10, no. 1 (2012): 37.

6. Frayn, *Tin Men*, 67.

7. See Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony,” *Episteme* 8, no. 2 (2011): 144–164. My discussion of the political and social barriers to effective lay evaluation of expert testimony is based on her article.

8. See Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 2.