

Is it good to be open-minded?

William Hare
Mount St. Vincent University

A serious question?

Some things are so clear, so transparent, so compelling, that it seems quite unnecessary, foolish even, to make a case in their defense. Cranks can always be found, of course, to deny what is manifestly the case, but we may well feel justified on such occasions in forgoing discussion and argument on the grounds that it would be pointless. Robert Park reminds us that scientists typically ignore the crank who claims to have discovered a perpetual motion machine.¹ What evidence or reasons could be brought forward in such cases that is not already abundantly familiar to anyone who will open their eyes?

Similarly, we might argue, what need is there to defend certain fundamental values when anyone, excluding fanatics, to whom the argument might be addressed is already convinced? Not surprisingly, given their time-honored status, many of the traditional virtues and ideals fall into this category. David Hume, the 18th century Scottish philosopher, comments in this way on what he calls the softer affections -- friendliness, generosity, gratitude, mercy, and so on: "It may be esteemed, perhaps, a superfluous task to prove that the benevolent or softer affections are estimable...envy itself is silent, or joins the general voice of approbation and applause".² Similarly, Frederick Douglass, the 19th century abolitionist, remarks that to argue the wrongfulness of slavery "would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your intelligence".³ Certain virtues and principles claim such broad allegiance that philosophical argument seems hardly required to establish their value which might almost be thought of as self-evident. The ideal of open-mindedness would be thought by many to fall into this category.

It is not surprising that the value of open-mindedness receives broad acknowledgment, considering that it has been identified as a virtue since at least the time of Socrates when it became a cornerstone of his approach to philosophical inquiry: "I am not

speaking dogmatically”, Socrates remarks, “from the certainty of assured knowledge. I am simply your fellow-explorer in the search for truth, and if somebody who contradicts me is obviously right I shall be the first to give way.”⁴ Socrates’ open attitude towards dissenting opinion and fresh evidence has been echoed by numerous philosophers including: John Stuart Mill, who observes that the person whose mind has been kept open to criticism is the person whose judgment can be trusted;⁵ C. S. Peirce, whose view of the scientific spirit is that we must be “ready to dump [our] whole cartload of beliefs the moment that experience is against them”;⁶ and Bertrand Russell, who comments that the absence of open-mindedness is “one of the chief reasons for the appalling dangers by which in our age the human race is beset.”⁷

Some philosophers maintain that “all of us genuinely want to know the truth and are open to arguments and evidence which will bring us to the truth.”⁸ It is reasonable, surely, to think that people do not need to be convinced in general of the importance of discovering the truth. Everyone will agree that it is valuable to determine the factors involved in an airplane crash, to identify the guilty party in a crime, or to discover the cause of an illness; and there is general recognition that there is no reliable way to proceed other than to examine what the evidence reveals in an open-minded manner. No one denies the value of open-mindedness when people are summoned to jury service; the general public recognizes, and is expected to recognize, its significance. If, as in a recent and notorious case in Canada, a member of the jury develops a romantic relationship with the accused during the trial, there is general disbelief and outrage, not least because impartiality is obviously destroyed.⁹ This generally positive view of open-mindedness is further indicated by the fact that few people are prepared to admit to being closed-minded or are happy to be regarded as prejudiced. Moreover, there is a certain antipathy towards indoctrination with its connotation of the closed mind that cannot, or will not, entertain criticism. All of this suggests that open-mindedness is held in high regard,

Of course, to appreciate and accept the value of open-mindedness is not necessarily to display the attitude in practice. There are many factors that interfere with a sincere desire to be open-minded, with the result that people fail to show an open-minded attitude despite their genuine commitment to the ideal. The claim above that everybody genuinely wants to know the truth echoes an observation made by the 17th century English philosopher, John Locke: “There is nobody in the commonwealth of learning who does not profess himself to be a lover of truth; and there is not a rational creature that would not take it amiss to be thought otherwise”.¹⁰ Words are no deeds, however, and Locke proceeds to say that there are, in fact, very few lovers of truth for truth’s sake. A person’s principles are tested by his or her actions, and it would be crucial, for example, to see whether or not Socrates would in fact give way if faced with sound counter-argument, or whether factors which make for closed-minded resistance would prevail.

The gap between commitment and practice is certainly real, and we need to work at identifying the traps that produce closed-mindedness.¹¹ Russell rightly insists that there is almost always and almost everywhere too little of the open mind.¹² Open-mindedness, however, continues to be widely endorsed as a worthy ideal -- philosophers and non-philosophers alike recognize its value -- and such recognition is not to be dismissed as insignificant, hypocritical, or merely self-serving. A sense that open-mindedness matters in scholarly work and in ordinary life is vital if we are to think it important to identify and counteract the pitfalls that lead to the ideal being lost sight of in practice. The ideal itself, however, is apparently alive and well; the case for it has been made in a compelling way by philosophers from Socrates to Russell, and it is a point of satisfaction for very many people to be thought of as open-minded.

If the ideal is not as robust as it might be, one explanation implicates the process of education itself. Morris R. Cohen, for example, remarks that “the real driving force in pure science is just natural wonder or curiosity. We all have it until we are educated out of it, and it provides the supreme joy of the scientist when he solves his problem”.¹³ Cohen is not

alone in this view. Carl Sagan makes a strikingly similar observation when he ruefully remarks : “I believe that part of what propels science is the thirst for wonder. It’s a very powerful emotion. All children feel it. In a first grade classroom everybody feels it; in a twelfth grade classroom almost nobody feels it, or at least acknowledges it”.¹⁴ It is a sobering thought that the manner in which we teach may itself be undermining one of the central aims of education.

Whatever the merits of this suggestion, it is very doubtful that the ideal of open-mindedness can safely be left to flourish without any special attention, provided only that we teach children in a way that does not stifle natural curiosity. Open-mindedness, as we shall see, has come to be misinterpreted in various ways, with the result that the ideal is quite commonly linked with certain attitudes and beliefs that do not properly reflect the virtue. These confusions have created skepticism about whether or not it is good to be open-minded, hence the question is indeed a serious one. If we are to distinguish open-mindedness from what others have rightly called the corruption of that ideal,¹⁵ we need first to appreciate what open-mindedness truly involves.

Elusive clarity

Russell remarks that it is only necessary to open our hearts and minds to let the imprisoned demons (bigotry, prejudice, bias and so on) escape.¹⁶ That is true -- but it is also precisely the problem. We cannot begin to profit from Russell’s advice if we are misled by popular distortions of the ideal of open-mindedness that not only cause confusion but lead ultimately to the ideal being regarded with contempt and cynicism. It is necessary, as Russell suggests, to dispel the fog that surrounds the ideal so that the landscape becomes visible and the way is made clear.

Properly understood, open-mindedness is a fundamental intellectual virtue that involves a willingness to take relevant evidence and argument into account in forming or revising our beliefs and values, especially when there is some reason why such evidence and

argument might be resisted by the individual in question. We are not open-minded, merely sensible, if we consult a timetable before heading to the bus station. Our open-mindedness is demonstrated, however, if we admit the cogency of an argument that counts against our own theory in which we have a good deal invested; or if we accept, as the unabomber's brother did, that the evidence shows that a close relative is probably guilty of a crime. There are factors at work in such cases that can all too easily persuade us to close our eyes to the evidence, and our open-mindedness is shown in circumstances that put our general habit of considering evidence and argument to the test.

Open-mindedness is worth striving for because it entails being prepared to take appropriate steps towards arriving at reasonable and justifiable conclusions. An open-minded attitude is an indication of sincerity and good faith in claiming that such and such is true or beneficial because it shows that we are willing to look at whatever would count for or against such claims.¹⁷ It is also charged with moral significance because often it is unethical to fall short of open-mindedness, as it would be, for example, if we were to ignore evidence tending to show that a person had been wrongly convicted.¹⁸ A failure to be open-minded can lead to injustice, as happens when we think ill of someone on poor evidence that we refuse to reconsider. This is why it is a mistake to think of open-mindedness as “a rather extreme variety of rationality that is praiseworthy and inspiring, but not essential to being a good person or citizen”.¹⁹ If, for example, we were more open to the kind of evidence that shows that racial and ethnic stereotypes are unwarranted, we would be a better society.

It does not take long to discover, however, that the notion of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue does not sit well with everyone. Occasionally, the objections raised are taken to constitute a complete refutation of open-mindedness as an ideal. Consider, for example, the following diatribe against open-mindedness:

“The idea of open-mindedness, that one should ‘listen’ to perspectives from each and every possible corner and then weigh them before making conclusions, risks marooning our civilization on the desolate shores of intellectual egalitarianism.

Open-mindedness is in a sense a prejudice in itself, since it makes the assumption in advance that all points of view are of equal merit and that they deserve equal treatment in our thought processes. It asks us to suspend all that we have learned in our travels, and asks us to set aside the principles that make our lives and nation possible in the first place. Open-mindedness acts to level the playing field, making evil as full a participant in our intellectual life as the good, and giving poison as prominent a place at the dinner table next to the food".²⁰

All of this is mistaken, and the underlying confusions have been identified elsewhere.²¹ Since considerable attention has been paid in the literature to such mistakes, and in the absence of any attempt to respond to such arguments, we are not guilty of being closed-minded if we give short shrift to a thesis riddled with confusion. Open-mindedness would not be the virtue that it is if it required us to waste time on ideas that have already been carefully scrutinized and found wanting.

Fallavollita presents an extreme position, an outright rejection of open-mindedness as an ideal at all, but we soon encounter more temperate views that suggest that open-mindedness, desirable as it may be, must be reined in. Fallavollita concludes that open-mindedness is simply not a virtue, but many who would reject that view are themselves only willing to embrace open-mindedness with serious reservations. More commonly than with other virtues, support for the ideal is quickly followed by a word of caution that fosters a certain suspicion about the attitude even as it offers support. Endorsement is lukewarm and half-hearted at best. Such hesitancy results from a concern over certain implications that are thought to follow from the attitude but which reflect a misunderstanding of what the ideal in fact requires.²² It is important to address these supposed problematic aspects of open-mindedness, especially since they turn up in the writings of reputable philosophers, to prevent qualified support from turning into outright rejection of the ideal.

A number of questionable assumptions are commonly made, as the three following sections reveal, assumptions that mistakenly associate a certain degree of open-mindedness

with a corresponding loss of judgment, conviction, and focus on the part of the person who is trying to live up to the ideal. The confusions at work are interrelated and perhaps the root error is the idea that unless open-mindedness is restrained it leads to a loss of epistemic confidence. Open-mindedness ultimately prevents us, it is supposed, from thinking that such and such is (i) foolish nonsense, (ii) definitively established, or (iii) sufficiently important to hold our attention. It is easy to illustrate these confusions from the recent literature, but more difficult to show in a compelling way how to resist these tempting lines of thought.

Nothing so absurd!

Many scientists and philosophers who believe in the importance of open-mindedness are anxious to call attention to the danger of being too open-minded. The favourite, seemingly irresistible, way of indicating the dire consequences of taking open-mindedness too far is to warn us that we can be so open-minded that our brains fall out. Such a warning appears in the work of Neil Cooper, Richard Dawkins, Paul Kurtz, Carl Sagan,²³ and many others, where the legitimate concern is that absurd and groundless claims are being seriously considered in the name of open-mindedness. Alien abduction and psychokinesis are favourite examples. To slightly modify Cicero, the point seems to be that there is nothing so absurd but some open-minded person has taken it seriously. Open-mindedness, in short, compromises our commonsense and good judgment.

Implicit in the warning is the suggestion that the attitude of open-mindedness somehow initiates a slippery slope from commendable receptivity to foolish dabbling with patent nonsense. The idea behind the injunction not to be too open-minded is that open-mindedness starts to function in an uncritical manner, unrestrained by considerations of evidence and argument, ready to embrace any outlandish claim that rightly ought to be dismissed. It is as if, to live up to the ideal, one has to be willing to take seriously, or even adopt, any idea without regard to its merits -- at least if we take open-mindedness too far.

Open-mindedness cannot be expected to flourish as an ideal if this debased conception is in circulation and gaining influence. Garrett Fagan has recently suggested that we have now reached the point where, in essence, the appeal to open-mindedness “functions as a shield to insulate ‘alternative’ beliefs entirely from critical analysis”.²⁴ In short, invoking open-mindedness works to deflect criticism by maintaining that those who raise objections to the claims in question merely display their own narrow, unimaginative, traditional outlook. Such a defense of the indefensible trades on the positive connotations of the virtue of open-mindedness to discredit opponents, but in fact contributes to the devaluing and discrediting of the virtue by substituting, under the same name, a mindless acceptance of that for which there is not only no positive evidence but an abundance of counter-evidence.

Regrettably, there is some indication that this “low redefinition”²⁵ of open-mindedness is having a debilitating effect even on those who see what is happening. Fagan, for example, remarks that “for the open mind, no possibility is off the table”, and “the open-minded readily promote speculations to the level of evidence”.²⁶ These references are presumably ironic, but it would be clearer if scare quotes were employed around “open mind” and “open-minded” in these comments to emphasize the fact that this is not the ideal at all. Not surprisingly, given the way such casual usage is gaining ground, Fagan concludes by adding his voice to the all-too-familiar reminder about our brains.

John Dewey recognizes open-mindedness as a fundamental intellectual virtue and reminds us that the criterion of educational success lies in the quality of the mental processes that are promoted.²⁷ It was clear to Dewey that open-mindedness is not at all a matter of uncritically entertaining and adopting new ideas: “It is very different from empty-mindedness. While it *is* hospitality to new themes, facts, ideas, questions, it is not the kind of hospitality that would be indicated by hanging out a sign: ‘Come right in; there is nobody at home’”.²⁸ Nobody at home, that is, to examine and assess the merits of the idea

in question. For Dewey, open-mindedness is an active and alert investigation of ideas that involves critical listening and careful attention.

Occasionally, it must be reluctantly admitted, Russell comes close to giving encouragement to the view of open-mindedness Dewey properly rejects, and almost leaves the impression that open-mindedness, at an extreme, means being ready to take seriously whatever one is told.²⁹ Elsewhere, however, Russell develops a notion of critical receptiveness that captures much more accurately his general view of open-mindedness and brings out the true nature of the ideal.³⁰ Critical receptiveness involves a readiness to consider new ideas together with a commitment to accept only those that pass scrutiny. Being receptive to ideas without appropriate critical appraisal leads to open-mindedness being supplanted by credulity. If completely unrestrained by a critical habit of mind,³¹ receptiveness inevitably drifts towards credulity, culminating in a person's willingness to accept an idea as serious or true although no good reason is offered for it. Russell maintains that open-mindedness will always exist where desire for knowledge is genuine;³² but a genuine desire for knowledge clearly involves trying to determine whether or not an idea has any merit, and that necessitates critical evaluation.

A readiness to be surprised³³ is not a willingness to be taken in. The essential difference between open-mindedness and empty-minded credulity can be illustrated with reference to the topic of extra-terrestrial beings. It is no mark of open-mindedness, only the extremist form of gullibility, to have any truck with Courtney Brown's theory that hundreds of Martians live in caverns in New Mexico having been transported there in spaceships by the Greys, a race of benevolent superbeings.³⁴ There is nothing remotely resembling evidence for these beliefs, and it would be a pity if anyone were to think that open-mindedness required that they dissent from Martin Gardner's assessment that Brown's theory is "pure baloney".³⁵ On the other hand, one crackpot theory in the field should not discredit Sagan's view that, with respect to the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, "good judgment isn't possible yet...an open mind should be kept."³⁶ This would still seem

to be a sensible attitude thirty years on. With respect to such a search, however, open-mindedness will vanish into credulity unless, as Sagan rightly observes, we exercise the greatest skepticism.

It is worth remembering, however, that critical skepticism directed at avoiding credulity is no guarantee that we will arrive at a true conclusion. It is an invaluable tool, but it will not always preserve us from error. Locke recounts the story of a Dutch ambassador who informed the King of Siam that sometimes the water in Holland would freeze so hard in winter that it would bear the weight of an elephant. To which the King replied: "Hitherto I have believed the strange things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair man, but now I am sure you lie."³⁷ Who could blame the King? His own experience made the report seem totally incredible, and it would be quite unreasonable to call him closed-minded. He evidently employed a version of the principle, later formulated by Hume, that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish."³⁸ As Hume remarks, a wise person proportions belief to the evidence; and, unfortunately, the King of Siam only had testimony as evidence.

Never say never!

I take the slogan from Daniel C. Dennett who detects this attitude in certain philosophers who will, it seems, never admit that we have sufficient evidence to exclude certain possibilities. "Never say never" is their motto. Perhaps, they muse, science will one day uncover evidence that is presently unimaginable -- to which Dennett replies in a telling remark: "I'm all for open-mindedness and scientific optimism, but surely...there are *some* occasions when the jig is up -- when it is just silly to hold out hope for such a scientific revelation."³⁹ The assumption revealed in this remark is that open-mindedness, admittedly desirable up to a point, contains the fatal flaw that it forbids or inhibits us from drawing a

firm and definite conclusion when that is just what is warranted by the evidence. Open-mindedness ends up being silly.

The worry that open-mindedness involves indefinitely postponing commitment to a position, so that it becomes a permanent state of suspended judgment, is nothing new. In a fine paper on the nature of scientific thinking written in the 1930s, Victor H. Noll reported that “there are some who decry the danger of making persons so open-minded that they lack convictions on anything.”⁴⁰ Noll admits that encouraging open-mindedness might have this consequence for a certain type of person, but he believes that the vast majority of people will remain willing to form definite conclusions. That does not, however, address the main issue. Maintaining that a lack of conviction is unlikely is not the same as challenging the alleged conceptual connection between open-mindedness and a lack of conviction.

A recent example of this assumption in the context of science turns up in a comment on Robert Park’s rejection of homeopathy as a proven medical intervention in his book, *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud*. After examining the claims of homeopathy, Park concludes that “there is no credible evidence that homeopathic remedies have any effect beyond that of a placebo”.⁴¹ Erin Steuter remarks that “while unproven approaches should always be treated with caution, science and medicine won’t advance very far if we don’t keep an open mind to approaches that differ from the conventional and orthodox.”⁴²

Keeping an open mind with respect to unconventional approaches in general, however, does not preclude coming to a negative assessment about a particular approach following a careful review of the case. No reasons are provided to show that Park has not examined the claims of homeopathy with an open mind, making a serious effort to be impartial and unbiased in his review of the evidence. His supposed closed-mindedness rests on nothing more than the fact that he has, in the end, reached a definite opinion about the merits of such treatment. Sagan, faced with a similar criticism to the effect that he had closed

his mind to evidence that the earth is about six thousand years old, responded succinctly: “Well, I haven’t ignored it; I considered the purported evidence and *then* rejected it.”⁴³

The purpose of looking at evidence in a serious and fair-minded manner is precisely to try to determine what to believe. If definite, albeit provisional, conviction following such inquiry is to be excluded, it is not clear what the value of an open-minded examination would be. Why is the evidence carefully scrutinized if not to determine in what direction it points? Any conclusions arrived at are, of course, tentative and fallible. Further evidence, or a reconsideration of existing evidence, could well lead to a revised position; and it this on-going willingness to revisit one’s position that preserves one’s claim to be open-minded even though, here and now, particular conclusions seem secure.

Russell points out that it is not the mere holding of beliefs that makes a person a dogmatist, but rather the grounds of the beliefs and the way in which they are held.⁴⁴ The closed mind of the dogmatist is avoided, Russell suggests, by being willing to consider new evidence which would further confirm or count against the view that seems most probable at the moment. Stephen Jay Gould remarks somewhere that science is all those things which are confirmed to such a degree that it would be unreasonable to withhold one’s provisional consent; and it is the notion of *provisional* consent, with its connotation of being ready to reconsider one’s views in the light of further investigation, that makes the ideal of open-mindedness perfectly consistent with having convictions.

Open-mindedness does not prevent us from saying “enough is enough”. Nicholas Rescher points out that (i) we must stand ready to acknowledge the corrigibility of our scientific conclusions, but (ii) at the same time, for the moment at least, stand committed to the imperfect conclusions we have drawn. As Rescher puts it, we have nowhere else to go.⁴⁵ In practice, to proceed with scientific inquiry, we have confidence in what we presently take to be the truth. Rescher reminds us, however, of the need for a certain intellectual humility, an attitude closely associated with open-mindedness, that recognizes that much of what now

seems secure may one day prove to be incorrect. We cannot know now, of course, which of our beliefs will fall into that category.⁴⁶

No stone unturned

It is also urged against open-mindedness that it potentially interferes with inquiry by distracting us from a given line of research in order to take up other possibilities that demand attention if our commitment to the ideal is serious and genuine. The idea would seem to be that a truly open-minded person is obligated to investigate each and every criticism and objection put forward, or even to seek out possible criticisms and objections, at the expense of the original project. Every alternative view must be explored, every criticism responded to, every doubt exhaustively examined. No stone must be left unturned.

A number of recent discussions illustrate the assumption at work here. Andreas Dorschel thinks that the liberal idea of open-mindedness can be self-defeating: "If someone was open to all ideas presented, time would be wasted to such a degree that no good idea could be properly thought over."⁴⁷ Basil Mitchell, writing about the limitations of open-mindedness, argues that the vigorous and tenacious pursuit of a line of inquiry requires like-thinking allies to whom one owes a certain loyalty. He maintains that "it is not sensible, or indeed possible, to be forever changing our stance, because in that case we should not adhere to our convictions long enough to put them to the test, or to effect worthwhile changes in the world, or to develop for ourselves a consistent character."⁴⁸ Similarly, Andrew Gluck argues that scientific advances "are often achieved by a narrowly focused concentration of efforts that may conflict with open-mindedness."⁴⁹ These sorts of objections are also familiar -- earlier versions can be found in the work of Thomas Kuhn⁵⁰ -- but their persistence suggests that it is far from easy to articulate in a persuasive way a conception of open-mindedness that is compatible with the kind of focus and commitment necessary for effective inquiry. There is clearly a difficulty for many people in grasping that open-mindedness is not inconsistent with refusing to pay attention to certain ideas.

Perhaps the first point to make in response is this. There are indeed, as these writers persuasively suggest, sometimes good reasons for not being distracted from one's present concerns, and these are reasons that an open-minded person will also have to consider when criticisms of their work are advanced or alternative lines of inquiry proposed. Open-mindedness operates at different levels. It is certainly possible to turn with an open mind to a consideration of every new possibility, although this attempt will surely collapse and self-destruct as each possibility gives way to another. It is also possible, however, to ask in an open-minded way about the wisdom of turning to alternative possibilities now compared with the wisdom of staying the course. It is simplistic to suggest that open-mindedness automatically dictates that one's present inquiries must be abandoned or one's attention diminished. Open-minded reflection might well suggest that there is compelling reason to continue one's present investigation and to defer a more detailed examination of criticisms and objections even if we suspect that these may have some merit. Any insights to be gained from our existing inquiry may be lost or unfortunately delayed if we change course. Open-mindedness does not mean pursuing every will-o'-the-wisp.

Secondly, as Philip Kitcher argues, open-mindedness does not require that we take every idea seriously.⁵¹ Kitcher divides claims into three broad groups, emphasizing that the categorization of particular claims may well change as new evidence is uncovered. First, there are those claims that currently enjoy greater evidential support than any alternative theory. Second, there are claims that are less well supported than the leading theories but which have promise because they seem capable of resolving certain puzzles. Third, there are claims so devoid of evidential support that they are not likely to be true and unlikely to further the search for truth. Kitcher proposes that claims falling into the third category be shelved, since they have not been found sufficiently interesting or compelling to warrant further attention at this time. A person does not cease to be open-minded because he or she ignores these claims.

Kitcher's argument reinforces a point made earlier by Russell.⁵² Writing in the 1950s, Russell concluded that there was, by that time, abundant evidence against astrology and that it would, therefore, be a waste of money given the limited funds available for research to devote resources to a field "so little likely to be fruitful". Turning away from astrology would not compromise one's commitment to the true scientific attitude which demands that we be guided by the evidence. Russell adds the further point, however, that if a private researcher were to produce evidence that supported a *prima facie* case for astrology, then it should be examined because the scientific temper refuses to consider any answer irrevocable.

In an interesting recent case, the Editor of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Larry Beutler, decided to publish a special issue of the journal dealing with Thought Field Therapy (TFT), a group of techniques that are believed by some to offer dramatic relief from post-traumatic stress disorder and other problems.⁵³ The special issue includes an essay by Roger Callahan, who developed the theory in the 1980s, as well as papers by various supporters and detractors. All of these papers were published without peer review, in order to address the concern that any review process would itself be biased against TFT. One contributor draws on Kitcher's categories to argue, on the basis of the flaws which he finds in Callahan's work, that TFT falls into the third category of claims that do not deserve scientific attention.⁵⁴ And yet, as is obvious, TFT has now received attention by being reported and discussed in a reputable scientific journal.

Gerald Rosen and Gerald Davison, in their paper in the special issue, point out various dangers when novel therapies are given prominence in reputable journals without having satisfied a peer-review process, such as future appeal to the fact that the theory was the subject of a special issue of a respectable journal in order to suggest the supposed esteem in which the theory is now held.⁵⁵ The article by Rosen and Davison, of course, will itself make it more difficult for anyone to claim this, as will the editorial disclaimer included with each article in the issue calling attention to the absence of peer review and the

expressed concern about bias. Nevertheless, supporters of the theory may suggest that this very publication indicates that TFT has moved from Kitcher's third category to his second at least, and constitutes a theory that is now recognized by scientists as promising. The editor himself notes that his decision may lend "premature and unwarranted credibility to TFT". It is possible also that the editorial decision to devote a special issue to TFT will give unintended and unwelcome support to the idea that open-mindedness requires that no stone be left unturned.

McNally urges us to consider "when our commitment to intellectual open-mindedness requires that we attend to nontraditional treatment interventions in clinical psychology",⁵⁶ and I would agree with him that open-mindedness imposed no requirement in this case to examine the claims of TFT. The editor would not have failed in his duty if he had decided to adhere to the regular review process, or even declined to send manuscripts dealing with TFT out for review. After all, even that step normally requires some judgment of *prima facie* worth. It may be, nevertheless, that open-mindedness as an ideal was well served by the editor's decision, notwithstanding the slight risk of giving encouragement to the view that every idea must be examined.

It is clear, for example, that there exists a certain skepticism about how open-minded the review process in science is to ideas that are unorthodox, a skepticism shared by scientists as distinguished as Brian Josephson who shared the Nobel prize for Physics in 1973.⁵⁷ There is some danger that talk of open-mindedness will be met with growing cynicism if some steps are not taken to counteract the suspicion that, as Josephson puts it, it is "next to impossible" to erase certain beliefs from the scientific consciousness. The special issue may serve to defuse the objection that theories such as TFT are ignored because of the closed-minded attitudes of the scientific establishment. The editor's decision in this case is the intellectual equivalent of acts of supererogation in the moral sphere.⁵⁸ It is a case of "going the second mile" in order to compensate for perceived bias, giving one "shelved" theory an opportunity to prove itself. A rare -- and possibly unprecedented --

decision to publish articles that a peer-review process would have rejected does not endorse the idea of open-mindedness as needing to leave no stone unturned, but is a useful reminder of the possibility of bias and the fallibility of the review process.⁵⁹ The ensuing discussion and controversy over the editorial decision may help to restore clarity on the question of when open-mindedness requires that claims should be given attention.

Concluding comment

Open-mindedness is properly thought of as a kind of critical receptiveness in which our willingness to consider new ideas is guided by our best judgment with respect to the available evidence. Genuine open-mindedness requires finding some middle ground between being ready to entertain every idea seriously and being excessively resistant to reasonable possibilities. This line of thought suggests a natural connection with an Aristotelian account of virtue as involving a mean between two extremes to be determined by the use of practical wisdom.⁶⁰ We may go too far in the direction of critical skepticism and lose sight of open-mindedness; but it is no mark of open-mindedness to be willing to embrace absurdity, to be unwilling ever to draw a conclusion, or to be ready to abandon a promising line of inquiry merely to pursue some other possibility. There may be a sense in which the merits of open-mindedness are obvious, but the confusions outlined above suggest, as Oliver Wendell Holmes reminded us,⁶¹ that there are circumstances in which what is needed is an education in the obvious.⁶²

Notes

¹ Robert Park, *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000: 8.

² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. In A. MacIntyre (ed.), *Hume's Ethical Writings* London: Collier Books: 23-156. (Original work published 1751.)

³ Frederick Douglass, "Oration, delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, July 5, 1852", in F. L. Hord and J. S. Lee (eds.), *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy* Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995: 203-18.

⁴ Plato, *Gorgias* 506 Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960. (Trans. W. Hamilton.)

-
- ⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977. (Ed. G. Himmelfarb.)
- ⁶ Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* Vol. 1, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931, #1.55. (Reference is to paragraph number.)
- ⁷ Bertrand Russell, "Can we afford to keep open minds?", *New York Times Magazine* June 11, 1950: 9, 37-9.
- ⁸ Elmer Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination and Christian Nurture* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993: 155.
- ⁹ G. F. Pappas disputes the link between impartiality and open-mindedness, in particular my own view that impartiality is one of the standards implicit in the attitude. Pappas writes: "I might be willing to reconsider my belief about who committed the crime. But only a substantial amount of evidence would lead me to believe that Doug was the criminal. I can be open-minded but not impartial because Doug is my friend". See Pappas, "Open-mindedness and courage: Complementary virtues of pragmatism", *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 32, 2, 1996: 316-35. But unless the evidence is examined impartially, free from partisanship (as Dewey puts it), then the person is not being open-minded. Factors intervene that prevent the evidence from being properly considered.
- ¹⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Glasgow: Fontana, 1977: 428. Ed. A. D. Woozley. (Original work published, 1689.)
- ¹¹ See my book, *What Makes A Good Teacher* London, ON: Althouse Press, 1993: 92-94.
- ¹² Bertrand Russell, "Can we afford to keep open minds", op. cit.
- ¹³ Morris. R. Cohen, *The Faith of a Liberal* Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970: 291.
- ¹⁴ Carl Sagan, "The burden of skepticism", *Skeptical Inquirer* 12, 1, 1987: 46.
- ¹⁵ Joel Feinberg, "The idea of a free man", in J. F. Doyle (ed.), *Educational Judgments* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973: 143-69.
- ¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World* London: George Allen and Unwin, 1951: 17.
- ¹⁷ Antony Flew, "Open-mindedness and good faith", *Durham and Newcastle Research Review* 10, 55, 1985: 234-38.
- ¹⁸ For a fuller account of open-mindedness, see my books, *Open-mindedness and Education* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979, and *In Defence of Open-mindedness* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985.
- ¹⁹ See Andrew L. Gluck, "Open-mindedness versus holding firm beliefs", *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 33, 2, 1999: 269-76. Gluck also maintains, without argument, that we cannot expect most students to become open-minded, yet ironically asserts that the view of education I have put forward is quite elitist. Unlike Gluck, however, I have never maintained that open-mindedness is only suitable as an educational aim for some.
- ²⁰ Paul Fallavollita, "In defense of closed minds" (September 8, 2000) at: <http://www.opinionet.com/commentary/contributors/ccpf/ccpf10.htm>
- ²¹ See my discussion in *What Makes a Good Teacher* op. cit., and my paper, "Teaching and the barricades to inquiry", *Journal of General Education* 49, 2, 2000: 88-109.
- ²² DeWayne A. Backhus examines similar problems which beset the notion of a theory and which contribute to endless confusions in science education. See his paper, "It's not just a theory", *The Science Teacher* 69, 4, 2002: 24-29.
- ²³ See Neil Cooper, "The intellectual virtues", *Philosophy* 69, 1994: 459-69; Richard Dawkins, "Science, delusion, and the appetite for wonder", *Skeptical Inquirer* 22, 2, 1998: 28-33, 58; Paul Kurtz, *The New Skepticism: Inquiry and Reliable Knowledge* Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992; and Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World* New York: Random House, 1995.
- ²⁴ Garrett C. Fagan, "The shield of the open mind", *Skeptical Inquirer* 25, 6, 2001: 66-7. Dale Beyerstein also points out that defenders of the paranormal like to use "closed-minded" as a term of abuse directed at those who criticize their views. See "Skepticism, closed-mindedness and science fiction", *Skeptical Inquirer* 6, 4, 1982: 47-53.

-
- ²⁵ Paul Edwards, "Bertrand Russell's doubts about induction", in A. Flew, *Logic and Language* (1st and 2nd series) New York: Doubleday, 1965: 59-85.
- ²⁶ Fagan, "The shield of the open mind", op. cit.: 66.
- ²⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* New York: Free Press, 1966.
- ²⁸ John Dewey, *How We Think* (2nd. ed.) Boston: D. C. Heath, 1933: 30.
- ²⁹ Russell, "Can we afford to keep open minds?", op. cit.
- ³⁰ See my paper, "Bertrand Russell and the ideal of critical receptiveness", *Skeptical Inquirer* 25, 3, 2001: 40-44.
- ³¹ Bertrand Russell, *On Education* London: Unwin Books, 1973: 156.
- ³² op. cit.: 133.
- ³³ Robert Alter, "A readiness to be surprised", *Times Literary Supplement* January 23, 1998: 15-16.
- ³⁴ Courtney Brown, *Cosmic Voyage: A Scientific Discovery of Extraterrestrials Visiting Earth* New York: Dutton, 1996.
- ³⁵ Martin Gardner, "Courtney Brown's 'cosmic voyage' into preposterism", *Skeptical Inquirer* 21, 3, 1997: 54.
- ³⁶ Carl Sagan, "UFO's: The extraterrestrial and other hypotheses", in C. Sagan, and T. Page (eds.), *UFO's: A Scientific Debate* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972: 265-75.
- ³⁷ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* op. cit.: 406.
- ³⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977: 77. (Original work published 1748.)
- ³⁹ Daniel C. Dennett, "Get real", *Philosophical Topics* 22, 1-2, 1994: 531-2.
- ⁴⁰ Victor H. Noll, "The habit of scientific thinking", *Teachers College Record* 35, 1, 1933: 7.
- ⁴¹ Park, *Voodoo Science* op. cit.: 57.
- ⁴² Erin Steuter, "Keep an open mind", *University Affairs* February 5, 2001: 5.
- ⁴³ Sagan, "The burden of skepticism", op. cit.: 46.
- ⁴⁴ Bertrand Russell, "Why fanaticism brings defeat", *The Listener* September 23, 1948: 452-3.
- ⁴⁵ Nicholas Rescher, *The Limits of Science* (Revised edition) Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999: 36-7.
- ⁴⁶ It is a matter of controversy in philosophy whether or not it makes sense to hold that some of one's present beliefs *are* false. Without taking a position on this, open-mindedness is satisfied, I believe, if we recognize that some of one's present beliefs may be false. See Simon J. Evnine, "Learning from one's mistakes: Epistemic modesty and the nature of belief", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 82, 2001: 157-77.
- ⁴⁷ Andreas Dorschel, *Rethinking Prejudice* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000: 15.
- ⁴⁸ Basil Mitchell, "Faith and the limitations of open-mindedness", in J. J. MacIntosh and H. A. Meynell (eds.), *Faith, Skepticism and Personal Identity* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994: 34-5.
- ⁴⁹ Gluck, "Open-mindedness versus holding firm beliefs", op. cit.: 274.
- ⁵⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, "The function of dogma in scientific research", in A. C. Crombie (ed.), *Scientific Change* London: Heinemann, 1963: 347-69.
- ⁵¹ Philip Kitcher, *Abusing Science: The Case Against Creationism* Cambridge: MIT Press. 1982: 168-9.
- ⁵² Bertrand Russell, "The spirit of inquiry", in J. Slater (ed.), *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* Vol. 11, London: Routledge, 1997: 433-40.
- ⁵³ *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 57, 10, 2001.
- ⁵⁴ Richard J. McNally, "Tertullian's motto and Callahan's method", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 57, 10, 2001: 1171-74.
- ⁵⁵ Gerald M. Rosen and Gerald C. Davison, "'Echo attributions' and other risks when publishing on novel therapies without peer review", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 57, 10, 2001: 1245-50.
- ⁵⁶ McNally, "Tertullian's motto and Callahan's method", op. cit.: 1171.
- ⁵⁷ Brian Josephson, "Stand up for rocket man v. armchair critic", *Times Higher Educational Supplement* August 12, 1994: 10-11.

⁵⁸ J. Urmson, “Saints and heroes”, in A. I. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958: 198-216.

⁵⁹ See the excellent “Editor’s Introduction”, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 57, 10, 2001: 1149-51. Beutler explains how the special issue originated and offers some insights into his motivations as editor.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a. In R. McKeon (ed.), *Introduction to Aristotle* New York: The Modern Library, 1947: 297-543. I am grateful to Elliot Cohen for suggestions here, and in particular for the idea that open-mindedness might be thought of as a kind of rational direction of curiosity comparable to courage as a form of rational fear control.

⁶¹ Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Collected Legal Papers* New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921: 295.

⁶² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 12th Annual Conference of Atlantic Educators, Université de Moncton, November, 2002.