Teaching and the attitude of open-mindedness

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Preamble

This paper originated as a keynote address to the B.Ed. class at Mount St. Vincent University, November 16, 2001. I have retained something of the informal style of a talk with some concessions to the fact that it now appears as an article.

Anyone who presumes to speak about virtue runs the risk of being accused of suggesting, contrary to all proper modesty and humility, that they themselves possess the very qualities of which they speak. I have faced this criticism myself more than once and working in this area no doubt makes it an occupational hazard. The accusation, sometimes made explicit, sometimes all too clearly implied, amounts to: "I suppose you think you're really open-minded". The tone or the look makes it quite unnecessary to add, "Let me set you straight on that". Along with Dr. Johnson, one wants to reply that you might as well say, "Who drives fat oxen should himself be fat". Those who speak and write about open-mindedness may not exemplify this quality to any great extent in their own lives, though if the account they give of the idea itself is well done, presumably that to some extent would tend to show that they have engaged in open-minded reflection about the various aspects of this idea.

My point is, however, that it is one thing to have some understanding of what an idea involves and quite another to live up to whatever ideals that idea may encapsulate. Moreover, I would not be inclined to say that increasing familiarity with the idea of open-mindedness encourages one to think that one does possess this virtue, since it only becomes increasingly clear through reflection just how many obstacles get in the way of attaining it. In this discussion, I want to look at a number of these obstacles. Of course, in distinguishing between a philosophical examination of open-mindedness and being an open-minded person, I am not suggesting that philosophy should be divorced from life. To believe sincerely that open-mindedness picks out an important human quality is to be committed to

trying to live up to it. Otherwise, what would one's belief amount to? It is an obvious fact of life, however, that to try is not always to succeed.

Let me emphasize at the outset that I am not talking here about something merely of academic interest, or even exclusively of interest to teachers. The attitude of open-mindedness has the closest bearing on matters of deep significance in our everyday lives. Consider two examples which illustrate this point.

(i) The Globe and Mail (October 13, 2001) had an article by Kate Taylor reporting on an interview with Harold Pinter, the well-known playwright. Pinter refers to the appalling events in New York on September 11th, 2001, and to his dismay over the reaction in the United States to American commentators who have dared to question aspects of American policy in the wake of the attacks. Pinter adds: "Opposing terrorism doesn't mean closing one's mind. I certainly intend to preserve my critical intelligence. Otherwise dissent is criminalized." My own sympathies are with Pinter. Preserving one's critical intelligence means paying attention to dissenting voices, here as elsewhere, so that one does not accept the dominant view without thinking. That means being open-minded to the possibility that the official version may not be the whole truth.

(ii) An article in Scientific American (November 2001, pp. 38-39) profiles Richard S. Lindzen, Professor of Meteorology at M.I.T., a dissenting voice in the chorus of scientific opinion which maintains that human activities such as burning fossil fuel have contributed in a significant way to global warming. Lindzen rejects this dominant view and also believes there is little cause for concern in the future. Perhaps his views are "hogwash" and "nonsense" as other scientists insist, but Lindzen's vigorous dissent contributes an element of open-mindedness to the debate, an openness to the possibility of an alternative interpretation of observed phenomena, and an openness to counter-evidence. John Stuart Mill (1974), in a memorable phrase, reminded us that "teachers and learners go to sleep at their post when there is no enemy in the field" (p. 105). Mill was making two points about dissent. It may help us to discover that the received view is false. But even if

the received view is true, it will be a much more vital truth if we have had to defend it against skeptics. We ourselves may not be able to contribute much to this particular debate, nor even sure what to conclude, but we surely have a vital interest in seeing that an open debate occurs, since the fate of our planet may be at stake.

I have barely started and I have already used the term "open-mindedness" several times without explaining it. This is not as peculiar as one might at first think, because we all have a good idea what open-mindedness is, and we know quite well what is being said when we hear that someone is open-minded. No one will have any difficulty following Harold Pinter's line of thought. Indeed, we might go further than this, as my famous namesake, the late R. M. Hare (1996),[1] suggested, and say that many philosophical truths are themselves rather obvious. Open-mindedness should be one of the qualities that education aims at, so said Bertrand Russell (1973), and I suppose, in a way, that is obvious. Russell made this observation, however, in the context of charting the intellectual virtues -- curiosity, intellectual courage, independent judgment and so on -- showing the connections among them and the place of open-mindedness in the overall framework, and the result is that his rather obvious remark takes on a depth and a significance it would otherwise lack.

I should immediately add that the truth of Russell's observation is not obvious to everyone. Some people reject open-mindedness as an ideal, and this may occasion some doubt about the value of this attitude. I wrote a book, In Defence of Open-mindedness (1985), to address the various objections commonly raised, and it became clear to me that these objections primarily grew out of confusion about what the attitude involves. Clearly, my defence did not succeed completely, since I see that the objections persist. Paul Fallavollita (2000) has an essay on the internet entitled "In defense of closed minds" which repeats many familiar confusions and makes no attempt to respond to previous attempts to clarify these issues, including my own. For example, Fallavollita maintains that "open-mindedness....asks us to suspend all that we have learned in the past in our travels, and asks us to set aside the principles that made our lives and nation possible in the first place" (p.

1). It does nothing of the kind! In my paper (1987) entitled “Open-mindedness in moral education”, I remark that “we know from experience that certain sorts of actions are more likely to produce good results, and it is useful to have a strong inclination to act in these ways. This does not mean that the principles in question can never be examined or challenged, but this is different from the view that they are up for discussion anew in every case” (p. 103). I mention these contrary views so that the value of open-mindedness will not be taken for granted and also because the view out there that it really isn’t valuable anyway is another obstacle to overcome.

Russell was doing what R. M. Hare (1996) would later characterize as trying to grasp the whole truth and expressing it as clearly as possible, and that, as Hare remarks, is the difficult part (p. 18). This means, as I would put it, trying to tell the whole story about an idea, with all the appropriate qualifications entered in, and with all the necessary examples to make everything abundantly clear. It is no secret that the history of philosophy reminds us that we can never do this, never tell the whole story, but that remains the unattainable goal. I won’t succeed either, but my task is to get this particular conversation going once more.

So I am not going to start with a definition. I am not convinced that definitions always make for clarity, and I think they function sometimes to stop thought rather than to provoke reflection. For example, a definition of art or music or poetry inevitably reflects what we recognize at the moment or historically as art, music or poetry. A definition is not well suited to accommodate a new form of these activities which is bound to come along, creativity being what it is, and there is some danger that the definition may work to exclude these new forms, to close our minds to seeing them as instances of art and so on. We will hear about pots of paint being flung in the public’s face, we will be told that anyone can dribble paint on a canvas, and so on. Our definitions have a historical limitation, but it is hard to remember this once they start to take hold (Kemp, 1958).

I want to try to get at the essential meaning of open-mindedness by way of an example, one that will indirectly suggest some of the key features of the attitude, and out of

which we might begin to construct an account for ourselves. Anyone familiar with the address to the court made by Nelson Mandela at his trial in Pretoria in October and November, 1962, when he faced two charges, that of inciting people to strike illegally, and that of leaving the country without a valid passport, will know that it is a remarkable statement, in some ways reminiscent of Socrates' address to the court in Athens that we read in Plato's Apology (Plato, 1969). Mandela knew, of course, that the court would not be swayed by his arguments, and indeed he was sentenced to three years imprisonment on the first charge and two years on the second; but his attempt quite definitely was to have the court look at things from his perspective, to listen seriously to his explanations and reasons, and to consider the possibility that the supposed obviousness of the situation might be viewed differently.

His main concern was not really to offer information and facts with which the court and the authorities were unfamiliar, and which is often central in legal proceedings. If open-mindedness were primarily a matter of accepting new information as we encounter it, we would hardly regard it as a special intellectual virtue, just a happy feature of the human condition. Our ordinary notion of learning from experience would do quite nicely, and this kind of "open-mindedness", adding new information as we meet it, would normally take care of itself. It would just be a natural part of ordinary existence as creatures who inevitably come across new ideas and who are learning all the time. Our experience and reading and so on would tell us things we didn't know before and we would become familiar with these things, and simply replace earlier mistaken or incomplete beliefs with better ones. I learned at school in England in the 1950s that everyone in Canada is bilingual, but I quickly revised that view when I arrived here, and that change in my belief system didn't say anything about my open-mindedness. Nobody was inclined to think that a reason for regarding me as open-minded. If I had not changed my belief on arriving here, that would have been very odd given the evident facts. So when Mandela pointed out (1990), among many other things, that the law in question was one which neither he nor any of his people had had any

say in creating, that he had made various representations to the government prior to the strike which had been ignored, that the strike in question was a peaceful stay-at-home protest, that the government had imposed bans on him without a hearing, and so on, all of this was known, or known to anyone who cared to entertain these ideas. What was needed, and what proved impossible at the time, was a willingness to appreciate the relevance of all of these facts in the context in question, and that required being open to their moral significance. There were many reasons, however, why such openness would have required something much more than merely noting these several points. Deep-seated assumptions about justice and morality had to be called into question, and long-standing prejudices somehow dislodged. Open-mindedness is a virtue just because a person is able and willing to have his or her views influenced by argument and evidence when such influence is costly to the individual or demanding in some way because there are forces inclining one to resist a challenge to those views. It requires acceptance in the face of temptation to resist.

Sometimes, of course, resistance will also present itself when it is, in a sense, just a matter of acknowledging and accepting a new piece of information, but unlike my example earlier concerning the misinformation I acquired at school, other examples can be found where new information necessitates giving up beliefs which, for a variety of reasons, we may be very reluctant to abandon. Once again we encounter the problem of obstacles. Consider, for example, what we might call the personal investment we have in a certain belief, and here we may take a dramatic case for purposes of illustration. Imagine that someone has developed, over the course of a long career, a theory which has been much admired. Suddenly, someone appears with an observation which points to a fundamental flaw in one's precious theory. This was essentially the position that Gottlob Frege, the German mathematician and philosopher, found himself in, one hundred years ago, when Russell discovered a fundamental paradox in Frege's system which effectively undermined his entire work. Russell rightly credits Frege with remarkable intellectual courage and open-mindedness because there would have been great temptation to deny the problem altogether,

to refuse to entertain the possibility, and to find ways of rationalizing the situation so as to avoid having to admit an error in one's theory. Russell paid tribute in this moving way:

> As I think about acts of integrity and grace, I realise that there is nothing in my experience to compare with Frege's dedication to truth....upon finding that his fundamental assumption was in error, he responded with intellectual pleasure clearly submerging any feelings of personal disappointment (Griffin, 1992, p. 245).

Russell called our attention to a very fine example of open-mindedness. Interestingly, Nicholas Griffin, who is editing Russell's letters, points out that a remarkably similar tribute can be paid to Russell himself! Russell discovered, after his Principles of Mathematics had gone to press in 1902, that many of what he had thought of as his own original contributions had, in fact, been anticipated by Frege in works which Russell had not read. Russell added an Appendix to his book acknowledging Frege's prior work (Russell, 1937, p. 501).

At other times, of course, as the example of Mandela's trial shows, it is not a matter of becoming better informed at all but of gaining a deeper appreciation of existing ideas, a new realization of the significance of what in fact is known. It is a matter of seeing what we know in a new light. This is one reason why philosophy has something to teach us even when its subject matter is what we already know. In reminding us of certain of our ideas and placing them within a frame of reference, we come to know them in a new way. To take an example closer to the work of teachers, we may know that the vast majority of characters in the books our children read are white, but it may not have dawned on us that this represents a hidden curriculum of racism, so common and ordinary that we fail to notice it. Seeing it, having it drawn to our attention, may be painful because it may suggest to us a criticism of ourselves with which we are not comfortable, and resistance sets in. Resistance to acknowledging the point. Resistance can be a good thing, of course, when it works as a protective device against being deceived. If only Jim Keegstra's students could have put up

more resistance (Hare, 1990)! In the example of covert racism in books, however, resistance is problematic because it works to shield us from something that we need to confront and acknowledge.

These two factors, the personal investment we may have in a belief, and the desire to protect ourselves from uncomfortable truths, begin to illustrate the reason why open-mindedness is thought of as a virtue or an admirable quality, namely that it emerges or is tested, if you like, in situations where genuine consideration or willing acceptance of an idea presents some difficulty to the individual which must be overcome. This is, however, no more than the beginnings of a long story. There are many temptations to fall short, many pressures which work against the virtue showing itself, many obstacles to be overcome, and failure is an ever-present possibility. If we think of the virtues as potentialities which may, in favourable circumstances, come to some kind of fruition, we can see why Paulo Freire (2001, p. 145) remarks that the virtues are not received but must be created and then re-created. They are not absolute possessions existing in an all-or-nothing sense, but qualities we may have, to some extent, in so far as they show themselves in our ways of thinking and behaving. We create the virtue of open-mindedness by struggling to overcome the various factors which make for closure; and we re-create it in so far as this continues to characterize our attitude towards ideas. There is no resting on one's laurels!

To get a proper sense of the difficulties, to tell the whole story, we would have to look at all of the ways in which closed-mindedness can set in. Here I can only begin this account by indicating some of the more common pitfalls. I mentioned prejudice in reference to the Mandela trial, and it may be useful to consider an example of prejudice interfering with open-mindedness in a context where we might at first not expect to find it at all. We sometimes think that science escapes the threat of closed-mindedness because science aspires to impartiality and objectivity. Bertrand Russell (1953) thought that the essence of the scientific attitude was the refusal to allow our desire to find a particular conclusion to override our considered judgment as to what that conclusion should be. That is to set out an

ideal, however, and the reality is often quite different. Stephen Jay Gould (1980) has shown, for example, how national pride and chauvinism, specifically the desire of paleontologists in Britain early in the twentieth century to trounce their colleagues in France, led them to accept the Piltdown hoax as genuine even though various anomalies, such as the amount of wear on the teeth given their recent eruption, were evident from the very start. It is astonishing that the desire to see the skull as genuine actually interfered with the ability of scientists at the time even to measure the cranial capacity accurately. Scientists thought they saw definite simian characteristics in the skull even though, in fact, it was nothing more, as we know now, than a fairly modern, quite average, human skull. An open-minded examination of this "find" was defeated by the desire to see one's country shine with the distinction of having the world's oldest human remains.

To take another case from ordinary life, here is a situation where unexamined assumptions undermined open-mindedness. People in Australia in the early 1980s were too ready to believe that Lindy Chamberlain had murdered her baby, that it could not have been carried off by a dingo as she claimed, largely because of assumptions about how people who have suffered a loss ought to display their grief. Her composure and calmness during interviews and questioning led to public condemnation and ultimately conviction in court, even though there was no clear evidence of guilt and even though we ought to know that people differ greatly in their demonstration of emotion. Subsequently, of course, the relevant evidence exonerating her turned up. The very tendency to prejudge, on the basis of dubious generalizations, is at odds with an open and impartial examination of the evidence, and needless to say, that has been behind many miscarriages of justice, including miscarriages here in Canada.

It is useful for everyone to notice the various ways in which thinking goes astray, and especially the various ways in which our own thinking tends to go astray. It is important to notice that we are all liable to succumb to the sorts of pressures mentioned above, but we each need to try to find out what our own particular weaknesses are so that we can attempt

to counteract those tendencies. Some of us will be prone to certain errors in thinking, other people to others. Antony Flew (1975) suggests that "one step in the right direction might be for everybody to collect their own set of arresting examples. Such sets need to be individually collected and individually weighted so as to offset each individual's particular assemblage of biases" (p. 62). So that if I find myself inclined to believe that a certain newspaper (let's not mention any names!) is utterly unreliable, then it would be useful for me to gather a set of examples where that newspaper was completely accurate though at the time I dismissed the reports in question out of hand. All in the interest of balance and fostering an open-minded outlook. Again, these problems have been known for a very long time. Aristotle (1963) said that "we should see what we ourselves are most prone to....and then drag ourselves off in the opposite direction" (Ethics, Book 2, 9).

There is, however, a slight catch, a very tiny hitch, in the way in which this story is unfolding, namely that the ability to collect such a set of examples presupposes that we are able and willing to notice our own weaknesses, and that calls for a good deal of self-awareness. Therein lies a problem. One of the oldest obstacles in the book, pointed out by Aristotle (1947) centuries ago, is that people are generally rather poor judges in their own case (Politics, Book 3, 9). Even earlier than Aristotle, Confucius (1938) had said that he had looked in vain for a single person capable of seeing his own faults and bringing the charge home against himself (The Analects Book 5, 26). Not one! So that attempts to improve our chances of open-minded reflection first require that we recognize that there is a problem to be addressed, but that fundamental obstacle is enormous. There is a paradox here. Becoming open-minded involves dealing with our biases. But dealing with our biases presupposes being open-minded enough to admit them. Add to that the fact that most people are inclined to think of themselves as quite open-minded anyway. The CBC documentary, "Lessons in hate" (1983), about the Keegstra case, contains a scene where that utterly closed-minded individual announces with a confident smile that he is more than happy to listen to the arguments and evidence of his opponents and to discuss the matter

with them. He sees himself as open-minded. Descartes (1968) comments on a related phenomenon in the opening sentence of his famous book the Discourse on Method, where he remarks that "good sense is the most evenly distributed of benefits because each of us thinks he is so well endowed with it that even those who are the hardest to please in all other respects are not in the habit of wanting more than they have" (p. 27). We could say the same about open-mindedness. Very few people are heard to complain that they wish they were more open-minded. But if we think that we are already sufficiently open-minded, there is very little chance that we will see the need to re-create the virtue in ourselves. I'm alright, Jack!

This is all very discouraging. This part of the story encourages the view that open-mindedness, along with many other idealistic notions, is little more than a pleasant myth, and that has become a popular view these days. It is necessary, however, to emphasize the problems if we are to escape from a naive view. We need to think about bias, prejudice, wishful thinking, cherished beliefs, unexamined assumptions, hasty generalizations, dogmatic opinions, uncritical acceptance, and a host of similar things, if we are ever to discover how these interfere with our ability to make good judgments. The trick, however, and it is not an easy one to master, is to stop short of outright pessimism where we conclude that these forces are bound to be our undoing and we end by saying to ourselves, what Whitehead said to Russell when Russell reported his discovery of the paradox mentioned earlier, "Never glad confident morning again" (in Russell, 1959, p. 75). It's all bleak! When that is the direction we are taking, it helps to remember that we can cite the Piltdown hoax just because we came to see through it. Without that, it wouldn't be the Piltdown hoax. Eventually, we were able to judge the evidence frankly and fairly. Frege did resist the temptation to dismiss Russell's paradox out of hand; he was able to admit the problems it created for his views. We have come to recognize in books, where we failed to see them before, examples of bias -- sexism, racism and so on -- and have found some ways to write in which these faults are diminished. We are able to travel literally to other countries, or

figuratively into the imaginative world of literature, and start to look at things from a new vantage point which frees us to some extent from the constraints of our former perspective, and see and hear what we previously failed to notice. Our minds begin to open. As John Ellis (1997) remarks, literature expands the limits of our experience dramatically, with the result that there is a broadening and deepening of that experience (p. 37). None of this would be possible if our minds remained closed. That is why I identify very much with Stephen Jay Gould's wonderful line that although the human order casts a veil over all our interactions with the universe, the veil is translucent, however strong its texture (Gould, 1980, p. 120). That translucence allows for the possibility of open-mindedness.

We must never think in terms of absolute success. Obstacles arise in new forms to trip us up, just when we think we are doing well. By the same token, however, we must not think of abject failure. Elsewhere (Hare, 2000), I have developed a line of thought to show that the idea that open-mindedness is completely illusory generates a paradox. One version of that argument runs like this: Let us suppose that we are inclined to conclude, after hearing the pessimistic story, that open-mindedness is just non-existent. Have we come to that conclusion having been impressed by good and compelling reasons for it? If we have, surely that would demonstrate our capacity in some measure for open-minded reflection. Have we, on the other hand, merely come to that conclusion for no good reason? If so, then there is no reason to take the pessimistic conclusion seriously. Either way, the idea that open-mindedness is illusory is not sustained. Teachers especially should never succumb to that utterly defeatist attitude. If even a limited success is possible in the form of some modest gains in the direction of becoming somewhat more open-minded, it will only emerge if teachers believe in that possibility and exemplify it to the best of their ability. Later, I want to consider what that might look like in teaching.

First, however, let me mention some illuminating ways of describing and thinking about open-mindedness. In commenting on the true attitude of science, Russell (1977) introduced the phrase "critical receptiveness". By contrast with another phrase, which for

many has come to capture the idea of critical thinking, namely reflective skepticism, critical receptiveness puts the emphasis on one's willingness to listen, to entertain an idea, to receive a suggestion, rather than on doubt, reluctance, resistance and so on which are suggested by skepticism. But the receptiveness must be critical, it is not blind or unquestioning. That way, said John Dewey, lies empty-mindedness (Dewey, 1966, p. 175). Without a critical component, open-mindedness becomes indistinguishable from gullibility and credulity, and we end up with the believer in the Loch Ness monster who takes that as evidence of his or her open-mindedness. This slippery slope gives open-mindedness a bad name, and leads to people trotting out those familiar and tiresome one-liners about being so open-minded that one's brains fall out. Russell's idea of critical receptiveness is not dissimilar to the idea of connected knowing, and Blythe Clinchy (1989), who has done much to explain the significance of connected knowing, has explicitly referred to Russell's ideas in that connection.

My own favourite way of thinking about open-mindedness comes from the recent work of the critic, Robert Alter (1998), who has used the phrase "a readiness to be surprised" to suggest the open-minded attitude we need to have when reading a piece of literature, and it is a wonderful way of thinking about open-mindedness in general. Being ready suggests a more or less settled inclination, which in the case of surprise amounts to a preparedness to half expect and welcome the unexpected, to see things differently, to draw the unanticipated conclusion, and to accept the fact without regret that one has to re-think one's ideas. To be ready to be surprised is to recognize in advance that we may be caught offguard, coupled with a hint of delight and pleasure in the anticipation of surprise that suggests a mind that is still curious, still wondering about things.

Closed-minded individuals are not ready to be surprised; they have a readiness alright, but their readiness is the ready-made answer, which provides them with a pre-determined way of looking at whatever comes up. The truth is known to them in advance. When they "look into something", they practice, even if they don't recognize it in

themselves, what Susan Haack (1996) labels a form of pseudoinquiry; they are "sham reasoners" who make a "case" for some proposition to which their commitment is already evidence and argument-proof (p. 58). One's purposes in inquiry, however, have to be honest and genuine. The spirit of inquiry has to be there. Seamus Heaney (1980), in his poem "Whatever you say, say nothing", writing about certain attitudes in his own Northern Ireland but which can be found anywhere, has reminded us that people can listen to what we say, not to learn anything, not to be pleasantly surprised, but only to put us in a preconceived category. He speaks ironically in this poem of "open minds as open as a trap". And the trap is ready to snap shut. I shall come back to a readiness to be surprised later on when I speak more about teachers.

Before going any further, I want to make special mention of one point which has not yet emerged but which will cause confusion if it is not addressed. It might be expressed in the form of a question and I will pose it in a deliberately blunt way: In recognizing the value of open-mindedness, are we dismissing the value of emotion and intuition? We have so far emphasized the importance of argument and evidence, and we have also seen how certain emotions, a strong feeling of national pride, can work to close one's mind. Furthermore, a considered, reflective judgment seems to be at odds with trusting one's instincts. Didn't instinct lead people astray when they felt instinctively that Lindy Chamberlain was guilty? In this way, doubts about the place of emotion and intuition in connection with open-mindedness arise. In response, I would suggest that emotion and feeling must not be thought of as invariably detrimental to, or inconsistent with, open-mindedness, but often as the condition of minds being opened. Think back to Mandela's trial. The court was aware of the facts, but they needed to feel what those facts meant for someone like Mandela. It is impossible for me to recreate Mandela's attempt to reach those sitting in judgment on him at the level of human connection, but these words from his address capture some of the emotion involved (Mandela, 1990):

> It has not been easy for me during the past period to separate myself from my wife and children, to say goodbye to the good old days when, at the end of a strenuous day at the office, I could look forward to joining my family at the dinner-table, and instead take up the life of a man hunted continuously by the police, living separated from those who are closest to me, in my own country, facing continually the hazards of detection and arrest. This has been a life infinitely more difficult than serving a prison sentence. No man in his right senses would voluntarily choose such a life in preference to the one of normal family social life which exists in every civilised community.
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> But there comes a time, as it came in my life, when a man is denied the right to live a normal life, when he can only live the life of an outlaw because the government has so decreed to use the law to impose a state of outlawry on him. I was driven to this situation, and I do not regret having taken the decision that I did take (p. 157).

There is a good deal of emotion in these simple but powerful words, but this was no attempt to achieve by emotion what reason could not justify. It was an attempt to engage with and arouse those feelings which would permit the recognition of the enormity of the political situation.

Something similar is true of intuition. As I have put it elsewhere (Hare, 2000, p. 95), sometimes it is just the nagging sense that something cannot be right, no matter how plausible and persuasive things seem to be, that leads to the discovery that finally explodes the apparently impregnable idea. That open-minded examination simply would not occur if our strong conviction that something is fishy did not make us go on being uneasy about whatever is at issue. Sometimes that feeling, that instinctive sense that there is a problem we cannot quite put our finger on, is the very thing which frees us from an unquestioning acceptance which serves to prevent an open-minded reconsideration.

Let me say a word or two about certain ways of thinking about open-mindedness, certain theories if you like, which contain an element of truth but which also contain the

seeds of possible misunderstanding. In the early part of the 20th century, philosophers such as Dewey and Russell and others had discussed open-mindedness, but interest in the idea picked up considerably in the late 1960s at precisely the time that educators were trying to develop strategies which would permit the serious discussion of controversial issues, including controversial moral issues, in the classroom, far removed from old style preaching of virtue. Indeed, the spectre of indoctrination, then much discussed by philosophers of education, probably inspired a resurgence of interest in open-mindedness. One strategy which quickly gained favour was the idea of the teacher playing the role of a neutral chairperson during the discussion of controversial topics in class, and Lawrence Stenhouse (1968) put forward the pedagogical model of teacher neutrality in an essay entitled "Open-minded teaching". His discussion immediately made an explicit link between open-mindedness and neutrality, in this case the neutrality of the teacher. Many of the ideas in Stenhouse's article were sound, such as the teacher not asking leading questions, not having a hidden agenda, and so on. It is important to remember, however, that open-mindedness is not incompatible with having and expressing a point of view; everything depends on how that point of view is held and presented. A teacher might, in favourable circumstances, be able to disclose his or her own position without thereby shutting down the students' thinking, and might even be able to convey the idea that he or she remains willing to seriously consider whatever can be said against their view. The students might see that the teacher, despite having a point of view, remains ready to be surprised. Stenhouse tended to overlook these possibilities.

Open-mindedness, then, is not the same as being neutral. In addition, it is not quite the same as being skeptical even though a skeptical turn of mind is very helpful in keeping our open-mindedness on course, and we saw an example of that earlier. Methodological skepticism, that is a habit of looking for aspects which may be doubtful, is a very useful tool for the open-minded inquirer. Some of the strategies suggested by those who write about media literacy help to foster a somewhat skeptical attitude, such as encouraging us to ask if

the representation is as inclusive as we might at first think, or what motivations might lie behind the text. These are now familiar questions which raise a doubt about taking everything at face value. Such questions insinuate a doubt which needs to be explored if we are to escape falling into a biased reading or interpretation. In these examples, skepticism supports open-mindedness because such doubts encourage us to consider other possibilities. When our doubts are settled, however, this does not spell the end of our open-mindedness. The crucial test is whether or not the matter is viewed with absolute finality. We can be quite confident that our view is correct, and still willing to seriously consider evidence which is said to undermine our view.

Today's certainty can become tomorrow's absurdity, today's impossibility turns into tomorrow's commonplace, and the open-minded person remembers this most important lesson from history. Richard Dawkins (1999), in his book Unweaving the Rainbow, reminds us how even a physicist as distinguished as William Thomson, Lord Kelvin, thought that heavier-than-air flying machines were impossible, and predicted that X-rays would prove to be a hoax (p. 129). These observations would not be interesting if Thomson were not one of the greatest scientists of his day, so I do not mean to impugn his reputation by repeating these well-known anecdotes. To state my main point, there is a great difference between dogmatic allegiance to an idea, which closes the mind to other possibilities, and firm but tentative conviction which remains open to reconsideration should reason arise to warrant that. Sometimes, of course, the matter seems to be so conclusively established with compelling evidence that there really exists no serious doubt, and our open-mindedness can only take the form of a hypothetical willingness to re-think matters in the very unlikely event that the burden of evidence should shift. Apart from such cases, the emphasis must be on knowledge as tentative and provisional. The other point about skepticism, of course, is that if you are too much inclined to be skeptical, you may not listen hard enough to what the other person is trying to say.

Open-mindedness, then, is different from being neutral and from being skeptical. We should add one further contrast. It is not the same as being right. Certainly, there is often a connection between being open-minded and being right, and it is easy to see why that should be. A person who attends seriously to the relevant evidence is taking the appropriate steps to arrive at a sound conclusion, and very often that desired result will come about. This, of course, is one reason why open-mindedness is such a valuable attitude to cultivate and why teachers should ponder Russell's wise words about the aims of education referred to earlier. By contrast, holocaust deniers will not look at the evidence, so it is no wonder that their conclusions are laughable. But we do have to be careful. Sometimes people turn out to be right, not because they looked into the matter with an open mind but because they blindly accepted the word of someone who, as it happened, proved to be correct. They simply backed the winner! And sometimes people end up on the wrong side, not because they were closed-minded, but because the available evidence at the time indicated a conclusion which subsequently turned out to be false. We know today that Alfred Wegener's theory of continental drift, first proposed in 1912, is correct, but it was generally rejected at that time, and it is tempting-- at first -- to think that his contemporaries were not being very open-minded (Edelman,1988). We may be inclined to lump them in with those who refused to look into Galileo's telescope. We need to remember that the geological evidence corroborating Wegener only emerged in the 1950s, and that the forces he had suggested to account for the continents moving were not adequate. So his contemporaries did not close their minds to available evidence; they drew the conclusion which was warranted at the time but which, in fact, turned out to be false. Similarly, those who have committed crimes are sometimes found not guilty, not because the jury failed to be properly open-minded but because the evidence which would have demonstrated guilt was simply not available to them.

What these three ideas -- being neutral, being skeptical, and being right -- indicate is that something which often gives us a clue about the presence or absence of open-

mindedness can trip us up unless we keep our heads clear about what open-mindedness means. These three ideas are attractive because they seem to offer a practical test of something as abstract as an attitude. They tend, however, to turn into a simplistic formula which sacrifices the complexity of the idea. It is never that easy!

Many writers and thinkers have had very interesting things to say about the open-minded outlook, what it means, and how hard it is to attain.

1. Here is one example which speaks of being willing to learn from others. “No one’s culture or way of life is so rich that it may not be further enriched by contact with other points of view.” That is from an essay on pluralism written some years ago by the American philosopher of education, Thomas F. Green (1966). Once stated in that direct and compelling way, it is hard to imagine that it could ever have been missed, but think of how threatened and how defensive people have been when invited to expand their horizons to include work from a different tradition or by a different group. Think how it was made to seem the death knell of standards and excellence, as if indeed that epitome of enrichment had already been reached and further exposure could only weaken it.

2. Consider a second example. “Open-mindedness means retention of the childlike attitude; closed-mindedness means premature intellectual old age.” That is John Dewey (1966, p. 175), of course, and I suspect he had in mind that innate curiosity and natural sense of wonder that children have. Carl Sagan (1987) offered a helpful observation about the kind of childlike outlook Dewey had in mind, and one that should give every teacher pause: “I believe that what propels science is the thirst for wonder. 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. Something happens between first and twelfth grade, and it’s not just puberty” (p. 46). That wonderful openness to new ideas can be lost. Richard Dawkins (1999, pp. 138-144) also has interesting things to say about the outlook of the child, how it is a kind of credulity, useful from an evolutionary point of view, but which needs to be supplemented by the development of critical faculties as children gradually turn into adults.

The problem, from Dewey's point of view, is to prevent the transformation and maturing of childhood credulity from turning into the closure, the narrowness, the unshakable conviction that he identifies with premature intellectual old age.

3. Let's go back to the 19th century for a third insight. "Nor can it be denied that a steady and immovable faith yields great peace of mind....and in many cases it may very well be that the pleasure [a person] derives from his calm faith overbalances any inconveniences resulting from its deceptive character." So observed the great American philosopher, Charles Peirce (1877), in his famous paper entitled "The fixation of belief". Peirce was not speaking here of religious faith particularly but of any belief in which a person takes comfort. And he realized that one great temptation in the direction of closed-mindedness was simply the security and confidence which comes from holding on to one's beliefs tenaciously. Peirce noted that being uncertain is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves to find refuge in settled convictions. I think that one of the values of my own subject, philosophy, and one reason for its value in teacher education, is that it helps to pull us back from settled conviction to that uneasy and dissatisfied state. I believe that teachers at school have a vital role to play in this regard also, and if they play it well it can help to keep alive the thirst for wonder that Sagan spoke of.

4. Back to contemporary times for our fourth example. bell hooks (1994) speaks about the situation students find themselves in, even at university, if they point out that certain writers or traditions are not represented in the readings for a certain course. They are often told to suggest what material can be included, and hooks comments: "This often places an unfair burden on a student. It also makes it seem that it is only important to address a bias if there is someone complaining" (p. 44). Her point is, I believe, that the open-minded teacher will be actively reviewing the curriculum to try to see if biases have crept in, biases which could prevent an open-minded inquiry, not merely waiting to react if and when problems are pointed out. The reaction she mentions is quite common. If we complain to a school, for example, we are likely to be told "No one else seems upset." So

what? Is the complaint valid or not? To wait for objections to arise is not to be recreating the virtue each day, as Freire put it.

5. For one final example, consider Maxine Greene (1994) whose work in philosophy of education, on such themes as imagination, freedom and pluralism, is greatly admired. She writes in an essay on "Teaching for openings: Pedagogy as dialectic": "I think that if I truly want to provoke others to break through the limits of the conventional and the taken-for-granted, I myself have to experience breaks with what has been established in my own life" (p. 1). She had just commented on how tempting it is to stay within the established order of things, Peirce's point above, and she realizes that if open-mindedness is to be a living ideal for her in her teaching, it has to be meaningful and experienced in a personal way; and that means acknowledging to herself how difficult it has been in her own life to break with conventional norms; and it means challenging herself, not just her students, to confront the new, the different, the unexpected. There is a lesson there for all of us.

Recently (Hare, 2001), I published a short essay in the Teaching Professor, a newsletter dedicated to improving university teaching. My piece is something of a departure for the newsletter. Most contributions offer practical suggestions and strategies that university teachers might find helpful. Mine is a philosophical piece, and I'm grateful that the editor was open-minded enough to think that it might be of interest and even, in its own way, helpful. I should say also that, although the newsletter is aimed primarily at university teachers, I formulated my ideas in such a way that they would have relevance for teachers at every level. My contribution was inspired by an essay Bertrand Russell (1951) published 50 years ago entitled "The best answer to fanaticism -- liberalism". Russell concluded this essay with what he called his "Liberal decalogue", ten commandments that, as a teacher, he wanted to promulgate. Emboldened by this example, I have set out my own ten commandments for teachers! I did not set out self-consciously to incorporate the ideal of open-mindedness into these commandments, but it occurred to me, after I was invited to give

the keynote address from which this paper derives, to go back to my ten principles to see if open-mindedness had made an appearance. Not explicitly, I discovered; there is no direct mention of the attitude anywhere in the list. But on closer inspection, and perhaps not surprisingly, it turns out to be very much present after all.[2]

My first principle, and not just the first on the list but one of peculiar significance, is this: Think of yourself as a student as much as a teacher. To see oneself just as a teacher, as having somehow passed from a previous state of being, namely a student, to emerge transmogrified as a new entity, a teacher, is troubling if the suggestion is that now one's exclusive obligation is to prompt learning in others. Think back to Maxine Greene's point. Unless she is provoking herself into on-going reflection, she cannot effectively do this for anyone else. Open-mindedness would no longer be true of her way of being, but something which had become translated into a learning objective for others, her students. Recall that Socrates did not want to be regarded as a teacher at all, partly, I think, because he wanted to emphasize that he too was caught up in the on-going inquiry. Paulo Freire's idea of the "teacher-learner" is the modern counterpart of that Socratic idea. To see oneself as a student as well as a teacher is to remind oneself that there is much to learn, probably a good deal to unlearn, and we'd better be ready to be surprised on both counts. There is that idea again, being ready to be surprised.

Having mentioned the famous Socratic denial, I hasten to say that I am not suggesting that we pretend that we are not teachers at all, only that we recognize that the student/teacher dichotomy is oversimplified and misleading. Thomas Kelly (1986), writing about the teacher's role in the discussion of controversial issues in the classroom, says that the teacher's views and ideas should not be compromised with what he calls "excessive humility or redundant qualifications" (p. 130). I agree with that, and my principle should not be thought of as in conflict with that sensible observation. Asked for your opinion by a student as to whether something is acceptable or not, you might be tempted to respond, for example, striving to appear humble and showing that you have an open mind: "Well, you

know, I'm not an expert but, as a very tentative and preliminary response, and remember that another teacher might well give you a different answer, I would, I think, be generally inclined to suggest, at least in certain contexts, and as far as the limited evidence presently available tends to indicate, that it might sometimes possibly be acceptable -- but that's only my opinion." That halting, stammering excuse for an answer will not gain one admission into the Hall of Fame for open-minded teachers. That caricature illustrates what Antony Flew (1975, p. 56) calls the death by a thousand qualifications. In the end one manages to say precisely nothing.[3] No, one's open-mindedness as a teacher is preserved if we simply state our opinion and show, by our behaviour, that we haven't stopped thinking. When our students know us, they will not need to hear these redundant and frustrating qualifications.

My second principle also alludes to open-mindedness. It states: Do not pretend to know more than you do nor assume that what you think you know is beyond challenge. I think we have all met teachers who could stand to ponder this particular principle. To be aware of the limits of one's knowledge and expertise is to be open-minded about the need to learn more, to learn from one's students, to consult relevant experts, to temper one's conclusions appropriately, and so on. To recognize that one's views are not beyond challenge is to be open-minded about criticism and the need to revise one's ideas. Some of my other principles also invoke the ideal of open-mindedness, but I will leave interested readers to take a look at them sometime and to figure out the connections.

Let me draw my remarks to a close. Michael Shermer, who writes a column on skepticism for Scientific American, has proposed some basic questions which help to keep our skeptical instincts in good shape. To the extent that we find ourselves inclined to pose these sorts of questions, the skeptic in us is alive and well. We can and should ask, for example: How reliable is the source of this claim? Has the claim been verified by another source? How does the claim fit with what we know about how the world works? These are excellent questions. Shermer (2001) calls the practice of asking such questions "baloney detection", with a salute in the direction of Carl Sagan. Shermer's suggestions led me to

wonder if a set of questions could be framed to allow a person to gauge his or her open-mindedness. As I was pondering this, I learned from Richard Dawkins (1999, p. 31) that Konrad Lorenz said that he hoped to disprove at least one of his own hypotheses each day before breakfast. I don't think there's a useful question there! Dawkins rightly remarks that that was absurd, and I think Lorenz must have been reading too much Lewis Carroll; but at least his heart was in the right place. So rather than have ask whether or not we try to disprove one of our favourite beliefs before breakfast every day, or try to believe six impossible things, in a more modest vein, I would suggest three questions which we all need to put to ourselves. I label these: (i) Checking it out! (ii) Going out of one's way, and (iii) Smiles and frowns.

1. Checking it out! When I encounter something surprising or something that seems counter-intuitive, when I hear it said that it's just obvious that something is true, or when everyone seems willing to rush to a conclusion, do I instinctively say to myself, "I must look into this a bit further". Am I curious about it or am I indifferent? The answer to that question provides a clue to my open-mindedness.

2. Going out of one's way. Do I make a point of trying to read a book or a newspaper, or watch a programme or film or look at an art work, or listen to a piece of music, which I have good reason to suspect will be opposed to some of my beliefs or run counter to my tastes? Am I keen to do that or am I generally disinclined? There's a second clue.

For me, however, the most important question, and I pay tribute here to R. M. Hare (1964) for putting me on to this many years ago, is the one that falls under my third heading:

3. Smiles or frowns? How do I feel if my students disagree with me or question something I have said? Am I pleased or am I unsettled? Do I see this as a problem or as a sign that things are going well? I cannot think of a better question for a teacher who is committed to open-mindedness to raise.

These three questions, which I have framed in the first person, will help us all get some perspective on our own open-mindedness. And that is the perspective that matters most.

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[1] R. M. Hare (1919-2002) died on January 29, 2002. His work exemplifies a standard of seriousness and dedication to the pursuit of truth that is an inspiration to anyone engaged in philosophical inquiry.

[2] I note that Martha Nussbaum's (2000) list of the ten central human capabilities, as she calls them, those qualities and abilities that would indicate that a human life is truly flourishing, does not contain an explicit reference to open-mindedness; but it is surely implied in such capabilities as being able to imagine the situation of another, and being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression.

[3] By contrast, Russell's (1947) observation that "the genuine Liberal does not say 'this is true,' he says"I am inclined to think that under present circumstances this opinion is probably the best'" (p. 27) expresses a modest and appropriate tentativeness.