

The ideal of open-mindedness and its place in education

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“The fading of ideals is sad evidence of the defeat of human endeavour”
-- A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*

It is tempting to smile at those self-satisfied theologians who saw no need to peer into Galileo’s telescope since the nature of the heavenly bodies was already known to them. Scripture plainly recorded (Joshua 10:13) that the sun on one occasion stood still in the middle of the sky, and consequently heliocentrism could not be true.¹ If absolute certainty is already at hand, what need is there to inquire and investigate? The history of science is littered with similar certainties that turned out to be illusory -- the impossibility of airships, X-rays, and continental drift, for example -- but hindsight is not available when we need it most. The difficult task is to recognize that a new idea deserves consideration, and to be willing to entertain it seriously, at the moment when we ourselves are strongly inclined to favor a view with which it conflicts.

If we are honest with ourselves, our own reactions when faced with rethinking a belief we have long accepted are often not dissimilar to those of Galileo’s contemporaries. When we are inclined to be contemptuous of those who would not see what was before their eyes, it is worth returning to our own day and our own inclinations. Congressman John Lewis from Georgia remarks, with respect to the reaction in 2001 to the exhibit showing James Allen’s collection of photographs of lynchings in the United States: “Many people today, despite the evidence, will not believe -- don’t want to believe -- that such atrocities happened in America not so very long ago.”² The examples will vary, but a similar point could no doubt be made in every society. The evidence is there, if we will only consider it, but open-mindedness is defeated by deep-seated assumptions that make it too painful to recognize the truth.

Open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue properly ascribed when an individual or a community is disposed to take into account all that is relevant to forming a sound judgment

and likewise disposed to reconsider judgments already made, or in formation, in the light of emerging difficulties, especially when it is tempting to avoid acting in these ways. In any absolute sense it is unattainable, and even relative success can be elusive. Those who try to be open-minded must steer clear of bias, prejudice, doctrinaire beliefs, hasty conclusions, fear of the truth, and pressure to conform, all of which undermine attempts to examine evidence seriously. To echo Descartes' observation with respect to good sense, everyone fondly imagines that open-mindedness is part of his or her own outlook however rare it may be in other people, but this very tendency is itself yet another obstacle to becoming open-minded. Not being ready to recognize the possibility of such a fault in ourselves, we are not sufficiently alive to the forces that bring about closed-mindedness.³

The challenge to entertain new possibilities is accompanied by the danger of being taken in by attractive but foolish nonsense. We must be receptive and welcoming to theories and discoveries that conflict with existing beliefs; but the history of science also tells us that this disposition can lead to credulity. Reflection on the Galileo story, reminding us of stubborn resistance, may even encourage untoward hospitality. Scientists in the early 20th century were too ready to welcome Piltdown Man, and more recently some have been ready to embrace cold fusion, psychokinesis, facilitated communication, and other embarrassments. A willingness to believe in these ideas only reveals how easily scientists can, in Martin Gardner's inimitable words, be hornswoggled (Gardner, 1981, p. 294). Before we point to the credulity of others, however, hands up all those who are quite sure they would not have been among that panic-stricken radio audience in 1938.

Open-mindedness surely deserves a central place in any philosophical account of education that is to prove satisfying. If we take seriously the notion of genuine inquiry, together with such related ideas as considering all sides to a question, paying attention to counter-evidence, viewing one's conclusions as provisional, learning from one's mistakes, and trying to rid oneself of bias, then the attitude of open-mindedness immediately presents itself as having fundamental significance. To be open-minded is, after all, to be critically

receptive to alternative possibilities, to be willing to think again despite having formulated a view, and to be concerned to defuse any factors that constrain one's thinking in predetermined ways. Without such dispositions which make for open-mindedness, inquiry degenerates into nothing more than the attempt to find whatever reasons will support the particular conclusions one desires and which have been accepted in advance. As C. S. Peirce remarks, the conclusion determines what the reasoning will be -- a process he rightly labels "sham reasoning" (Collected Papers, 1.57).⁴

Genuine inquiry, by contrast, involves struggling against preconceived ideas, hasty conclusions, and other factors that distort and undermine our efforts, in a determined effort to arrive at whatever beliefs, interpretations, explanations, theories, policies, or value judgments seem warranted as a result of attending to the widest range of considerations that can be adduced, always mindful that further experience, reflection, imagination, and the exchange of ideas may lead to these tentative views being overturned or modified. Such inquiry is, by its very nature, open-minded; and open-minded inquiry, both as a way of learning and the desired outcome itself, is an indispensable feature of education if education is to mean more than simply reinforcing prejudices or receiving beliefs uncritically. A view of education emerges in which inquiry and reflection constitute ongoing and fallible processes framed by such regulative ideals as understanding, judgment, appreciation, sound interpretation, and knowledge. These ideals are always beyond our reach, of course, but they operate as goals we may hope to approach wherever the passion to learn, as Peirce puts it, is not contaminated by having an axe to grind (1.44).

Such a conception of education is intimately connected with open-mindedness, as philosophers have recognized since Socrates declared his determination to follow the argument where it leads. Philosophers of very different philosophical persuasions share the view that open-mindedness is vital. In the early twentieth century, for example, Bertrand Russell maintained that open-mindedness is one of the qualities that education should aim at because he recognized that a genuine desire for knowledge, where knowledge is understood

to be provisional and revisable, presupposes open-mindedness (Russell, 1973, p. 43).⁵ Similarly, John Dewey singled out open-mindedness as one of a small number of attitudes that are really central in education because intellectual growth and ongoing development require a disposition to welcome new ideas, modify our purposes, and allow experience to accumulate (Dewey, 1966, pp. 175-6). And Jacques Maritain, in articulating the central aims of education, called attention to the distinction between truth as a set of ready-made formulas that close the mind, and truth as the progressive attainment of new truths and interpretations that open and enlarge the mind (Maritain, 1943, p. 12).

An awareness in our own day that education is intimately connected with the development of open-mindedness is readily apparent in the sharp contrast drawn between education and indoctrination, in the importance placed on dialogue and the community of inquiry, in the objections raised to the mere transmission of knowledge, and in many of the ideas that inform critical thinking, media literacy, and the discussion of controversial issues. A commitment to open-mindedness in education is especially evident in the writings of contemporary philosophers such as Maxine Greene, with her determination to break through “the limits of the conventional and the taken-for-granted” (Greene, 1994, p. 1); in Paulo Freire, with his emphasis on consciousness-raising, unveiling reality, and the quest for emancipation (Freire, 1970); and in Israel Scheffler, with his conception of the teacher as someone who submits his or her ideas to the critical scrutiny of the students and who is open to the possibility of learning from their reaction (Scheffler, 1989, p. 3).

We may add to these encouraging signs acknowledgment that mission statements of schools and school boards often include reference to open-mindedness as an ideal of education. Before we become complacent, however, it is important to remember that open-mindedness, in the context of schooling, is threatened by a number of factors. One only has to look at the American Library Association’s list of “most challenged” books in recent years to see that many groups are anxious that students not consider certain ideas, and these challenges can dampen any enthusiasm teachers may have for opening up the curriculum.⁶

Encouraging discussion of controversial and open-ended questions in the classroom demands of teachers a readiness to live with the criticism that will almost certainly be directed at them, not knowing how much support they will receive from their school or school board. In addition, pressure on teachers to “cover the material” in the curriculum and to prepare students for standardized tests leads to the postponement of opportunities to reflect on ideas in a manner that might foster ways of holding beliefs that are conducive to open-mindedness.

These realities can easily foster a cynicism about open-mindedness that contributes to the fading of ideals that Whitehead feared. Unfortunately, this tendency is exacerbated by the fact that various philosophical doubts about the possibility and desirability of open-mindedness surface frequently, as the following examples indicate:

(i) It is claimed, for example, that open-mindedness conflicts with having firm moral principles, and that it implies a kind of relativistic attitude towards values. This confusion is bound to arise if we fail to distinguish between (a) having definite beliefs and (b) holding them in a certain way (Russell, 1948). A willingness to reconsider one’s principles should genuine difficulties arise -- as has happened frequently in the past, such as with respect to the treatment of animals in medical experimentation or with what counts as acceptable forms of punishment for criminals -- does not diminish the seriousness with which our present principles are now regarded, nor does it mean that contrary principles are regarded as equally acceptable.

(ii) It is quite commonly thought that open-mindedness involves a willingness to embrace absurd and even outrageous views, granting them a status that commonsense would deny. This particular confusion arises when we neglect to bear in mind that open-mindedness, as Dewey famously put it, is not empty-mindedness (Dewey, 1966, p. 175). It is a form of critical receptiveness (Russell, 1985, p. 117), not mere receptiveness to any idea regardless of its merits. Cranks, who find their views rejected, are quick to claim that their

critics are not open-minded, but open-mindedness requires that we examine the evidence seriously, not that we accept it.

(iii) It is increasingly common to hear open-mindedness dismissed as simply impossible, one of those Enlightenment myths that postmodernism has scuttled. Since we always come to a situation with a set of preconceptions, our perceptions are filtered through our existing framework of ideas. Such fundamental and invisible assumptions in our conceptual framework, it is argued, make it “extremely difficult if not impossible” to take certain views seriously (Warren, 1994, p. 165). The confusion here stems from sliding from what is admittedly difficult to what is said to be impossible. That distinction, however, is of the utmost importance, and while the difficulty cannot be denied, the allegation of impossibility must be resisted.

There is nothing controversial about the claim that open-minded reflection on fundamental and invisible assumptions that are embedded in our framework of ideas is immensely difficult. It cannot be impossible, however, because fundamental and once invisible assumptions have been exposed and repudiated in the past, and what is actual must be possible. Every scientist, artist, and thinker who has challenged or overturned a tradition and brought us to see the world in a new way stands as a counter-example to the claim of impossibility. If it really were quite impossible, there would be no point trying to keep the ideal of open-mindedness alive except for revisions within our own ideological, conceptual and scientific framework. Open-mindedness, however, involves recognizing that the very framework of ideas we acquire through education and socialization, not just particular beliefs within that framework, may in time generate a new set of ideas that undermines that very framework itself (Hare, 1979, p. 53).

There is no reason to believe that we are utterly helpless prisoners of the traditions and framework we have come to accept, and this rules out the pessimistic conclusion that open-mindedness simply cannot occur (Allport, 1954, p. 20). Gadamer observes that every tradition is “prejudiced” in the sense that it predetermines interpretation to some extent

(Gadamer, 1989), but this should not be taken to mean that we cannot come to question the interpretation that we place on experience. The ideal of open-mindedness rejects prejudice, not in the sense of subscribing to the myth of a prejudice-free position, but in aspiring to a position that is less prejudiced than before by exposing prejudice wherever it can be found. It is especially important that teachers reject the pessimistic view and maintain their commitment to the ideal. If cynicism about open-mindedness can be resisted, it may be possible to look for ways in which the difficulties that block our efforts to be more open-minded may be overcome.

With that goal in mind, the contributions that make up this special issue are timely indeed. The overall impact of this work will be to enrich our understanding of the ideal of open-mindedness and to renew our sense of its significance in education. Candace Stout shows us how encountering works of art can foster that curiosity and receptivity that breaks down the narrow confines within which imagination may be trapped. Terence McLaughlin makes the case that even though open-mindedness may encounter certain limits with respect to basic moral principles, one should be hesitant about accepting claims about such limits too quickly and, even here, open-mindedness may have application. Michael Shermer argues that open-mindedness helps to distinguish genuine science from pseudoscience, and puts forward a “Baloney Detection Kit” to assist us in finding that delicate balance between openness and skepticism. Paul Bitting advances the idea that cross-cultural understanding, grasping the perspective of another person, results from the kind of open-mindedness that involves seeing another person’s world “as it is”, and this is a form of aesthetic awareness. Michelle Forrest emphasizes the importance in education of opening students’ minds to the bias that is embedded in the way in which content is presented and reminds us that the danger of bias is never far from our own work.

Douglas Stewart’s review of a recent book dealing with 50 modern thinkers on education complements these essays very well, reminding us of the ideas of influential philosophers of education and educational theorists whose work has opened our minds to

new ways of thinking about teaching and education. Many of these thinkers, including Michael Oakeshott, Maxine Greene, Elliott Eisner, Jane Roland Martin, Paulo Freire, Israel Scheffler, Nel Noddings and others, have also been instrumental in helping the ideal of open-mindedness in education to flourish.

It is entirely fitting that this special issue of work in philosophy of education should give particular recognition to John Dewey, and it is a great pleasure to include a new portrait of Dewey by Antony Hare. It was Dewey, after all, who reminded us of the importance of attitudes in general in education, and who issued the stark warning that closed-mindedness means premature intellectual old age. My thanks to all of the contributors, to the general editor, Douglas Simpson for his invitation, helpful advice, and encouragement, and to Margaret Graham of Texas Tech University for recreating the diagrams in the essay by Michael Shermer. To assist readers who wish to pursue the issues raised in this special issue further, I have compiled a bibliography of recent work on open-mindedness and education.

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¹ The Copernican claim, defended by Galileo, contradicted the literal reading of Scripture and it was for this reason that the theologians condemned Galileo and rejected the new scientific view. For an excellent discussion, see Ernan McMullin, “Galileo on science and Scripture”, in Peter Machamer (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Galileo Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 271-347.

² Quoted in David Levering Lewis (2002). Lewis reviews here two recent books dealing with lynching.

³ Joseph Beatty asserts that open-mindedness is too cool and cognitive a virtue to include what he calls an existential-moral dimension which would enable us to see our own character as revisable. No reason is offered for this arbitrary limitation with respect to the object of one’s open-mindedness, and it seems perfectly possible, albeit challenging, to be open-minded about one’s own character. See Beatty (1999).

⁴ References to Peirce are to volume and paragraph in the Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Hartshorne, Weiss, and Burks eds. 1931-58). Once again, I am indebted to Susan Haack both for her account of Peirce on the intellectual virtues and for her own insightful comments on the nature of inquiry (Haack, 1998).

⁵ When Russell speaks of a concern for knowledge, it is worth recalling that he reminds us that “truth is for the gods; from our point of view, it is an ideal, towards which we can approximate, but which we cannot hope to reach” (Russell, 1985, p. 149). He also points out that “there is a tendency to use ‘truth’ with a big T in the grand sense, as something noble and splendid and worthy of adoration. This gets people into a frame of mind in which they become unable to think” (Russell, 1927, p. 254).

⁶ In this context, however, it is good to be able to report that in December 2002, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Surrey School Board cannot ban books dealing with same-sex parents in elementary schools.