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Open-mindedness as a Christian Virtue?

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Many Christians are wary of open-mindedness. It suggests to them a kind of wishy-washy relativism or uncritical acceptance of others' beliefs. Indeed, the prevailing attitude toward open-mindedness, at least within large segments of the Christian community, is captured by the cynical but familiar adage: "Don't be so open-minded that your brains fall out."

The present paper is an exploration and partial defense of open-mindedness undertaken from a Christian standpoint. The defense is partial in that I am interested in defending a fairly specific conception of this trait. This leaves open the possibility that there are other personal qualities that can reasonably be described as "open-mindedness" but that I have no interest in defending.

I shall begin with a very brief sketch of open-mindedness together with an attempt to identify the source of Christian unease with it. Next I shall develop and illustrate a particular account of the basic character of open-mindedness. Armed with this account, I shall turn to the question of whether Christians should regard open-mindedness as a genuine virtue, that is, as a genuine *excellence* of personal character. I shall defend an affirmative answer to this question. This in turn will lead to an important and challenging objection to my proposal, my response to which will shed some additional light on the critical features of open-mindedness. In the final section of the paper, I shall offer some remarks about the process of becoming open-minded.

Some Misgivings about Open-mindedness

Whatever its more detailed features, open-mindedness has *something* to do with how we respond to others' beliefs, and typically at least, to beliefs or ideas that conflict with our own. An open-minded person does not cling blindly to her beliefs in the face of challenges or counter-evidence to them. She is not dismissive of beliefs or positions with which she disagrees. Nor does she shy away from rational dialogue or engagement with people who believe differently than her. In these ways, open-mindedness is the *opposite* of traits like narrow-mindedness, closed-mindedness, dogmatism, intellectual dismissiveness, provincialism, and the like. These are (arguably, at any rate) the *vices* or character defects associated with the virtue of open-mindedness.

But even under this rather positive description, many Christians are likely to be suspicious of open-mindedness. This suspicion is rooted, I think, in at least three different negative perceptions of open-mindedness:

1. Open-mindedness as *wishy-washy*. As indicated above, open-mindedness is often equated with wishy-washy, relativistic ways of thinking. It is thought to connote a kind of intellectual flaccidity or flabbiness: a lack of intellectual seriousness and rigor. In a recent discussion of open-mindedness, Robert Roberts and Jay Wood imagine a young college student taking a survey course in philosophy whose intellectual life is marked by this way of thinking. The student "treats the survey as a smorgasbord at which she partakes with an appetite. With a course of sixteen weeks she may have been a Platonist, an empiricist, a skeptic, a Cartesian, a Kantian, a utilitarian, a social contractor, a mind-body dualist, a

Berkeleyan idealist, a reductive materialist, a theist, an atheist, and an agnostic. Having scratched the surface of a debate, having followed for a few steps the flow of a dialectical exchange, she commits quickly to each theory, easily relinquishing its contrary, then passing on to the next. She is bright, but under the pressure of successive presentations of ideas, her intellectual character is too soft to hold onto a position.”¹ Understood in this way, it is not difficult to see why Christians (or any thinking person) might object to open-mindedness.

2. Open-mindedness as *cowardly*. Some Christians are suspicious of open-mindedness on the grounds that it represents a failure of intellectual *nerve*. Particularly for Christians of a moderate to conservative stripe, the question of whether to be open-minded typically arises in the context of intellectual “combat” or “assault.” They often feel “under attack” within the culture at large. They sense that the broader, secular community is hostile and antagonistic to what they believe. To be open-minded in this context, they think, is to betray a kind of intellectual weakness or cowardice—it represents a failure to stand up to one’s intellectual accusers or enemies.
3. Open-mindedness as *foolish*. A third misgiving about open-mindedness comes from a place of relative intellectual *confidence* (vs. weakness or defensiveness). Some Christians, convinced that their beliefs about God, morality, and the like, are correct, see no reason to be open-minded. “My Christian beliefs are true,” they think, “so what’s the point of taking seriously the beliefs of people who disagree with me?” Indeed, to these folks, open-mindedness threatens to do considerable intellectual *damage*. It threatens to

lead them away from truth and down the path of deception. In this way, open-mindedness can be regarded as downright intellectually foolish: as a guaranteed *squandering* of cognitive goods.²

We shall return to these objections to open-mindedness below. Before we do so, however, it will be helpful to have a more precise and intuitively plausible conception of open-mindedness before us. I turn now to develop such a conception.

The Nature of Open-Mindedness

My aim in this section is to sketch an intuitively plausible account of open-mindedness whereby it is at least initially plausible to think of open-mindedness as a genuine excellence of personal character. In the section that follows, I shall take up the question of whether open-mindedness thus conceived really *is* a virtue—or rather, whether it is really is a virtue when examined from a distinctively Christian standpoint.

How, then, should we think about open-mindedness? What are its essential or defining features? In attempting to answer this question, I shall begin with an account of open-mindedness which, while initially very plausible, has some significant limitations. Once the relevant cases and criticisms are on the table, I shall proceed to articulate a more plausible account.

On one initially attractive model, open-mindedness is essentially *a willingness to “set aside” or loosen one’s grip on a particular belief in order to give a fair or impartial hearing to arguments or evidence against this belief.* A great deal could be said in explanation and support

of this definition. What I wish to focus on here, however, is the fact that if this definition is correct, an exercise of open-mindedness necessarily (a) presupposes a *conflict* between an open-minded person's beliefs and the beliefs toward which she is open-minded and (b) involves a certain amount of rational *assessment* or *adjudication* (for instance, an assessment of the plausibility or force of the relevant counterargument). I shall argue that, in fact, neither (a) nor (b) is necessary.

First, an exercise of open-mindedness does not presuppose a conflict between the open-minded person's beliefs and the beliefs toward which she is open-minded. To see why, consider the case of a judge preparing to hear opening arguments in a particular case. The judge might have no prior opinions or biases about any part of the case. And she might have no stake in its outcome. There might, then, be no conflict between the beliefs of the judge and the beliefs or arguments she is preparing to assess. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the judge might give an open-minded hearing to or make an open-minded assessment of these arguments. Open-mindedness might lead her, say, to *follow the arguments where they lead and to refrain from drawing any hasty or premature conclusions*. If so, then contrary to (a), open-mindedness need not involve a conflict between the open-minded person's beliefs and the beliefs or arguments at which her open-mindedness is directed.

This case is consistent, however, with the idea that open-mindedness necessarily involves *some* kind of intellectual disagreement or dispute, for clearly there is a conflict between the arguments toward which the judge is being open-minded. Accordingly, it might be thought that open-mindedness is something like *a willingness to adjudicate two or more conflicting viewpoints in a certain impartial, detached, or "open" way*. But even this represents an overly restrictive way of thinking about open-mindedness. To see why, consider a group of high school

physics students who have just been led by their teacher through a rigorous unit on Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. The unit has been a considerable challenge for the students, but they are, by and large, on board; they understand the core concepts, principles, and claims of the Special Theory. In the next unit of the course, however, the teacher plans to introduce his students to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. This unit is bound to prove extremely challenging for them. The material will require an even greater and more radical departure from their usual concepts of space, time, laws of nature, velocity, frames of reference, and the like. It will require them to think even further "outside the box." Here there is no relevant intellectual conflict or disagreement whatsoever. The students are preparing to study the General Theory, and this theory is a natural (if complex and mind-bending) *extension* of the Special Theory; it does not *conflict* with the Special Theory. And yet it is reasonable to think that the students' efforts to understand the General Theory might be facilitated by a kind of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness might help them "detach" or depart from some of their usual ways of thinking and to "wrap their minds around" the core elements of this challenging theory.³ This shows that an exercise of open-mindedness does not, in fact, presuppose a conflict between any of the beliefs or standpoints at which it is directed.

Cases of this sort also make clear, contrary to (b) above, that open-mindedness need not manifest in the activity of rational *assessment* or *adjudication*. For the physics students are not attempting to *assess* the General Theory; they are not attempting to judge whether it is true or false, or to identify its logical strengths or weaknesses. Rather, at this point, they are simply trying to *understand* or *comprehend* the theory.⁴

For a similar kind of example, imagine a detective attempting to solve an especially confounding case. His investigation is complete: he has examined the crime scene in painstaking

detail, studied the forensics reports, interviewed all the witnesses, followed up on possible suspects, and so forth. He is in possession of all of the relevant evidence. Yet the evidence is perplexing and contradictory—so much so that he is unable to conceive of a single coherent explanation of it. Like the previous case, this case is void of any intellectual dispute or disagreement.⁵ And the person in question is not attempting to assess or evaluate any particular belief. Again, he is merely attempting to identify *some* possible explanation of a certain perplexing set of data. He is not yet at the stage of attempting to assess or evaluate this explanation. And yet, here again it seems that open-mindedness might be relevant. Specifically, open-mindedness might permit the detective to imagine or conceive of an explanation of the relevant data that would otherwise be beyond his reach. We might imagine him muttering to himself, “Now, keep your thinking open. Consider all the relevant possibilities. Just keep an open mind.” What this suggests is that open-mindedness, in addition to facilitating rational assessment and attempts to grasp a certain subject matter, can also facilitate attempts to *identify* or *conceive* of a certain (otherwise unthinkable) possibility or explanation.⁶

We have seen that neither (a) nor (b) above are essential features of open-mindedness and thus that our initial definition of open-mindedness, while perhaps a good start, is too narrow. What, then, might a broader, more plausible account of open-mindedness look like? I propose the following multi-part definition, the key terms of which I will then go on to clarify (in reverse order):

An open-minded person is one who is (a) able and willing (b) to transcend a certain default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously a distinct cognitive standpoint.⁷

Part (c) of the definition addresses the immediate aim or motivation of open-mindedness. A person who sets aside her belief about some issue in order to consider a competing standpoint, but who fails to give an honest, fair, or impartial consideration to this standpoint, fails to manifest genuine open-mindedness. While she may *appear* open-minded, inasmuch as she ignores, distorts, or misrepresents the view she is considering, her cognitive activity is not truly open-minded. Thus, in cases in which open-mindedness involves a kind of rational assessment or adjudication, it necessarily involves “taking seriously” the view or standpoint at which it is directed. This underscores the fact that open-mindedness is a “facilitating” trait or virtue, that is, that it can facilitate or support an exercise of other putative virtues like intellectual fairness, honesty, and impartiality. That said, we have seen that open-mindedness does not necessarily involve the activity of rational assessment. And where it does not, the question of “taking seriously” an alternative standpoint does not arise.⁸ Again, the open-minded physics students, for instance, need not be attempting to “take seriously” or to give a fair or impartial hearing to Einstein’s General Theory. Instead, their open-mindedness is aimed immediately at *understanding* or *conceiving*—that is, at “taking up”—the standpoint in question.⁹

Part (b) of the definition gets at the conceptual core of open-mindedness. It says that open-mindedness is principally a kind of cognitive “transcending” of an initial or “default” cognitive standpoint. This characterization fits well with standard cases of open-mindedness, where the open-minded person sets aside her belief about some issue in order to consider an opposing position, argument, or the like. Here the “default” cognitive standpoint is the one that the open-minded person sets aside or moves beyond. This characterization also fits well with the other cases discussed above. For instance, the open-minded detective is attempting to

“transcend” or move beyond his limited grasp of what might explain the relevant evidence. Similarly, the physics students are attempting to “transcend” their present understanding of space, time, and the like.

The case of the open-minded judge is a bit trickier in this regard. While the judge might be attempting to adjudicate or “take seriously” the merits of the competing arguments, in what sense is she “transcending” a “default” cognitive perspective? For again, she is presently *neutral* with regard to the matter at hand (that is, the guilt or innocence of the defendant). This case illustrates the point that while open-mindedness is typically a matter of *doing* something—of a kind of positive or forward cognitive movement—it sometimes consists in *refraining* from engaging in cognitive activity. The judge, for instance, refrains from drawing any hasty or premature conclusions about the case she is hearing. This shows that open-mindedness sometimes consists, not in a positive opening of one’s mind, but rather in an *unwillingness to close it*. In cases of this sort, the “default” standpoint is one that the open-minded person might otherwise be tempted or likely to take up (for example, the standpoint of a hasty conclusion); and the open-minded person “transcends” this standpoint by remaining apart or detached from it.

Finally, as indicated by (a), open-mindedness on my view involves both a willingness and an ability. Clearly, if a person is capable of taking seriously objections or counterevidence to her beliefs, say, but is consistently *unwilling* to do so, then she is not genuinely open-minded. Indeed, it is tempting to think that open-mindedness is nothing more than a willingness to engage in the relevant sort of cognitive “transcending.” But this is not quite right. For suppose that a person is genuinely *willing* to consider alternative viewpoints regarding some matter but has been so indoctrinated regarding this matter, or holds so tightly to her beliefs about it, that she is psychologically *incapable* of doing so. Such an agent would not be genuinely open-minded. An

open-minded person, then, is necessarily willing *and* able to “transcend” a default cognitive standpoint for the sake of “taking up” or “taking seriously” some alternative or distinct standpoint.¹⁰

Before turning to consider how open-mindedness conceived along these lines should be assessed from a Christian standpoint, I want to supplement the account just sketched with two additional claims. First, as I am thinking of it, open-mindedness necessarily ranges, not merely over the relevant cognitive detaching or transcending, but also over the open-minded agent’s *cognitive response* to certain judgments that arise from this activity. Suppose, for instance, that I set aside or transcend a particular belief of mine in order to consider the merits of the “opposing side,” that I come to judge that the preponderance of evidence actually supports this opposing standpoint, but that I fail to give up or even to loosen my grip on my original belief; instead I go on believing precisely as I did prior to encountering the relevant counterevidence. Presumably it would be a mistake to consider me genuinely open-minded.¹¹ Were I truly open-minded, then, in addition to giving a serious hearing to the merits of the “opposing side,” I would also adjust my beliefs in light of what I learned from this hearing—which in this case would likely mean abandoning my original belief. This, then, points to a further general feature of open-mindedness: namely, that where an exercise of open-mindedness involves rational assessment, it also involves adjusting one’s beliefs or confidence levels in a way that reflects the outcome of this assessment.¹² This is not, however, an essential or required feature of open-mindedness, for we have seen that open-mindedness does not always involve rational assessment.

Second, as I am thinking of it here, open-mindedness is characteristically motivated by or “flows” from a “love” of intellectual goods like truth, knowledge, and understanding.¹³ This is to say that an open-minded person is typically motivated to consider counterevidence to her beliefs,

to think “outside the box,” and so on, *because* she desires to know or understand; and, more specifically, because she desires knowledge or understanding and is convinced that the activity characteristic of open-mindedness is an effective way of achieving this goal. Therefore, on the present account, open-mindedness is characteristically accompanied by a certain intellectual *motivation*.¹⁴ I take it that G.K. Chesterton had something like this point in mind when he famously quipped: "Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."¹⁵

We now have before us a fairly robust and, I hope, familiar and plausible conception of open-mindedness. I turn now to consider whether open-mindedness conceived in this way should be regarded as a Christian virtue.¹⁶

Open-mindedness as a Christian Virtue

Should someone attempting to be faithful to the Christian scriptures and theological tradition regard the foregoing account of open-mindedness as picking out a genuine virtue, that is, as identifying a genuine *excellence* of personal character?

At some level, the answer is undoubtedly “yes.” New and Old Testament scriptures alike place a premium on a concern for truth (see, for instance, Ps. 51:6, Ps. 15:2, Js. 1:5, Acts 17:10-11, and 1 Thes. 5:21). And again, according to the account just sketched, open-mindedness is characteristically rooted in or flows from precisely such a concern. Moreover, as illustrated by several of the cases discussed above, open-mindedness has clear intellectual “benefits” that should be welcomed by anyone. No reasonable Christian would deny, for instance, that open-mindedness might be valuable in contexts like those of the physics students or the detective

discussed above. Again, in situations like these, open-mindedness can facilitate its possessor's attempt to *understand* a foreign or challenging subject matter or to *conceive* of a coherent explanation of a perplexing set of data. Likewise, no Christian should have a hard time recognizing the value of open-mindedness relative to certain *intramural* disputes, for example, in the context of good faith theological disagreements or discussions with other believers.

The more difficult question is whether Christians can plausibly regard open-mindedness as a virtue when it is directed at beliefs that conflict with their own distinctively *Christian* beliefs. Let us refer to the former beliefs as *unChristian* beliefs. These, again, are beliefs that are incompatible with the acceptance of a distinctively Christian view of the world. While I will not venture to specify all of the elements of a “distinctively Christian” worldview, I shall assume that they include beliefs like that there exists an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent deity, that human beings have an eternal existence, that Jesus is the son of God, that he was resurrected from the dead, and so on. Accordingly, unChristian beliefs would include beliefs to the effect that such claims are false (for example, that Jesus was not raised from the dead) or beliefs that are otherwise incompatible with these claims (for example, that only material things exist). The pressing question, then, is whether Christians can reasonably regard open-mindedness directed at unchristian beliefs as a genuine virtue. We will have occasion to engage this question later in the discussion. For now let us return to the three misgivings about open-mindedness identified at the outset of the paper.

According to the first objection, open-mindedness is essentially wishy-washy or relativistic: it involves intellectually flaccid or flabby ways of thinking or believing. It should be clear that when conceived in the way I have suggested, to be open-minded is *not* essentially or inherently to be wishy-washy, relativistic, or flaccid. For one thing, to be open-minded in this

sense is not necessarily to adopt or embrace the views toward which one manifests open-mindedness. Nor does open-mindedness require giving serious consideration to just *any* view with which one disagrees. For, insofar as open-mindedness is constrained by something like a love of truth, it will involve an appropriate kind of selectivity or discrimination. A person who cares deeply about “getting things right,” about developing an *accurate* view of the world, is unlikely to give an open-minded consideration to a belief or argument which she has little or no reason to think might actually be true.¹⁷ For these and related reasons, there should be little concern that open-mindedness, when understood in the suggested way, involves wishy-washy or relativist thinking.

The second misgiving about open-mindedness identified earlier stems from the idea that for many Christians, the question of whether to be open-minded often arises in an intellectually combative context—that is, in a context in which the Christian or her worldview is being “attacked” by another person or by the culture at large. And again, the suggestion is that to be open-minded vis-à-vis one’s intellectual enemies or opponents amounts to a kind of intellectual weakness or cowardice. This prescription embodies a rather striking “enemy ethic.” It suggests that the stance Christians should have toward their enemies is one of defensiveness and force—perhaps even of retaliation. But this prescription is, in fact, diametrically opposed to the New Testament’s teaching about how Christians should be oriented toward their enemies. Jesus of Nazareth taught, not only that we should “love our *neighbors* as ourselves,” but also, and much more radically, that we must love our *enemies* (Mat. 5:43-44). What does such “enemy love” require of us? While I cannot pursue this question in depth, surely it involves respecting and giving serious consideration to our enemies’ *beliefs*—and particularly to those beliefs that really “matter” to them. If I feed and clothe my neighbor or enemy, but ignore, distort, or otherwise fail

to “take seriously” his deeply held beliefs, then surely I fail to embody the kind of love that Jesus commands.¹⁸ This suggests, contra the objection, that Christians have a *special* obligation, that there are in fact distinctively *Christian* reasons, to be open-minded.¹⁹

Two additional points are worth making in connection with this objection. First, it bears repeating that “taking seriously” a particular belief need not involve accepting this belief. As already noted, open-mindedness is principally a matter of “transcending” an initial or default cognitive standpoint. While it *can*—for reasons sketched above—require giving up or loosening one’s grip on one’s beliefs, there is no immediate reason to think that this is likely to be required especially often. Second, it is important to regard the kind of open-mindedness that is part and parcel to Christ-like enemy-love as being rooted in a place of deep *confidence and power*. When Jesus calls his followers to love their enemies, he is not asking them simply or irrationally or against the full force of their wills to *cast* themselves at the feet of their enemies; he is not calling his followers to a kind of blind or arbitrary self-sacrifice. Rather, Christ-like enemy-love is, at least in its purest form, rooted in a deep knowledge, trust, and acquaintance with God himself.²⁰ The same goes for the kind of open-mindedness entailed by such love. We shall return to this point below.

According to the third misgiving, open-mindedness is a foolish intellectual gamble. Again, the idea here can be put thus: “We as Christians already *have* the truth. So why should we bother being open-minded toward people that disagree with us? Indeed, doing so seems bound to lead us down a path of cognitive error. Therefore, open-mindedness is no virtue.” We have already identified part of the problem with this objection, namely, that even if we do possess the truth, Christian love may require us to give serious attention to the beliefs of those that disagree with us.²¹ An equally serious problem is that the objection bespeaks an extremely unChristian

intellectual *arrogance*. It is remarkable that Christians in particular (and especially Christians of a more conservative or traditional stripe) are known for touting humanity's "fallen" (even "depraved") nature while at the same time displaying an apparently unshakable confidence in their own beliefs. Such a mindset is remarkable because surely our fallenness extends, not just to the "moral" dimension of our nature, but also to its *cognitive* or *epistemic* dimension.²² This suggests an additional distinctively Christian reason for being open-minded. Again, if we believe (as we should) that original sin extends even to our cognitive or epistemic nature, we ought to be especially willing to listen and give serious consideration to those with whom we disagree. An appropriate Christian humility demands nothing less.

Open-mindedness and Christian Faith

At this point the following objection is likely to arise: "On the present account, when open-mindedness leads to a favorable assessment of some belief that one presently rejects, it requires that one adjust or change one's beliefs in response to this assessment. Do you really mean to suggest that Christians should be open-minded in this way relative to their *Christian* beliefs—that we ought, say, to repudiate one of these beliefs if our assessment of a corresponding nonChristian belief seems to call for it? Wouldn't this involve holding loosely to our Christian beliefs in a way that is incompatible with genuine *Christian faith*?"

My answer, in short, is that I think we *should* be open-minded in connection with our Christian beliefs—even to the point of repudiating these beliefs if the result of an open-minded inquiry calls for it.²³ I do not, at any rate, believe that there are any *Christian* (or other good) reasons for thinking otherwise. Indeed, given the point above about the cognitive or noetic

dimensions of sin, I think Christians have a special reason *not* to regard any of their beliefs as beyond error or doubt. It is also important to bear in mind that, as I have described it, the relevant willingness to give up or revise a particular belief is characteristically motivated by something like a “love of truth,” that is, by a desire to see or understand things as they really are. And this again is something on which the Jewish and Christian scriptures place a premium. Finally, to refuse to be open-minded about one’s Christian beliefs is to open the door to a kind of intellectual *dishonesty*. For, if one makes such a refusal, and is confronted with compelling evidence against one’s Christian beliefs, then one is likely to ignore, distort, or suppress this evidence: one is likely, as it were, to “hide” from what one has reason to think is actually *true*. But surely the God of the Bible does not welcome (let alone *require*) this kind of dishonesty.²⁴

It is important, however, to clarify or qualify my position here in several ways. First, I am open to the possibility that *if* one’s Christian worldview is on the whole adequately supported, then one is justified in holding somewhat more firmly to (and thus being somewhat *less* open-minded about) those beliefs that are especially central or integral to a Christian worldview (for example, the “essentials” or “majors” of the Christian faith).²⁵ This is not to suggest that the beliefs in question are immune to counterevidence or that they are beyond reflective questioning or revision. Rather, the suggestion is merely that they can reasonably be given an initially privileged position relative to the other elements of one’s Christian worldview (and again, this only if one’s Christian worldview is adequately supported on the whole). While I cannot explore this proposal in any detail here, I think it has considerable plausibility.²⁶ And if it is correct, it suggests a subtle but important qualification to the claim that we should be open-minded even about our Christian beliefs.

Second, when I say that open-mindedness requires adjusting one's beliefs or confidence levels in light of one's open-minded rational assessments, I take the cognitive or evidential perspective in question to be a *settled, all-things-considered* one. Suppose, for instance, that I have a well-supported belief that P, but that my open-mindedness leads me to make an honest and impartial assessment of a certain argument for not-P, and that I come to find this argument compelling. It does not follow from this that I shall have to give up my belief that P. For it might remain that, while I now have some evidence against P, the *totality* of my evidence still supports P, that is, that *all things considered* I have good reasons in support of P.²⁷ Relatedly, it is important to do justice to the fact that our assessment of our own reasons or evidence for our beliefs can fluctuate from one moment to the next, even when these reasons remain more or less the same. This is at least partly a function of the fact that the evidence we have relative to a given belief can be vast and complicated, such that it can be very difficult, at any given moment, to keep the totality of this evidence "before our minds," so to speak. For instance, suppose again that while having good reasons for my belief that P, I come to find a particular argument for not-P compelling. As the force of this argument sinks in, I might (momentarily) lose sight of the *support* I have for P, and thus be led to think (mistakenly) that the totality of my evidence now supports not-P. Surely, given the fact that the totality of my evidence actually supports P, I need not repudiate my belief that P. Accordingly, the position I wish to defend is that open-mindedness requires adjusting one's beliefs or confidence levels only when, from a *settled* (and all-things-considered) perspective, one's open-minded inquiries call for such an adjustment.²⁸

Third, I see little reason to think that being open-minded about one's Christian beliefs in the suggested way is incompatible with the very notion of *faith* understood in a Christian way. As indicated above, Christian faith is not a matter of accepting what, on the whole or from a

settled perspective, one has little if any reason to think is actually *true*—or worse, what one has reason to think is *false*.²⁹ This again would amount to a kind of intellectual *dishonesty*.

Furthermore, while open-mindedness applied to Christian belief does bring with it a certain intellectual tentativeness, this tentativeness need not be a matter of “holding loosely” to the relevant beliefs, or at least not of “holding loosely” in a way that conflicts with a genuine and robust faith. On the contrary, it is consistent with a very firm and realistic acceptance of the tenets of the Christian faith.

These qualifications notwithstanding, I do not wish to deny that being an open-minded Christian is likely to prove challenging in various ways. It is likely, for instance, to demand a considerable amount of intellectual effort and to involve periods of doubt and uncertainty. The *easier* and more *comfortable* route is to be closed-minded and dogmatic about one’s Christian beliefs. But again, we have seen that such comfort comes only at the expense of a kind of intellectual integrity and honesty. And, especially *as* a Christian, I regard this as a price that is decidedly *not* worth paying.

We have seen that, when understood in a certain way, there are a variety of reasons for thinking that open-mindedness is indeed a Christian virtue: not only is it useful for acquiring knowledge that Christians do and should value, but there are also some distinctively Christian reasons for being open-minded. A call to open-mindedness is embedded, I have suggested, in the biblical injunctions to care about truth and to love our neighbors and enemies, as well as in any plausible theology of original sin. Finally, we have seen that open-mindedness, when properly conceived, is neither wishy-washy, cowardly, nor foolish in the ways suggested at the outset of the paper.

Becoming Open-Minded

In this final section, I shall attempt to say something concerning the “how to” of open-mindedness. This is not a task that I feel especially qualified to perform as a *philosopher* (rather than, say, as a psychologist or spiritual advisor). Nonetheless, I am convinced that the process of becoming open-minded is to a significant extent a matter of reflective commonsense. This is, in any case, the spirit in which the following remarks are offered.

First, a word about how *not* to pursue open-mindedness. Like any character trait, open-mindedness is not achievable by immediate or direct choice. I cannot successfully *will* to be open-minded any more than I can will to be patient or compassionate or generous. This is because, in its purest form at least, open-mindedness is a deep inner trait or “heart attitude.” It makes significant demands on one’s desires, emotions, thoughts, and actions. And one’s habits or dispositions in this regard are not the sort of thing that can be changed or modified on demand. The result is that any strategy or practical steps relevant to becoming open-minded are bound to be at least somewhat *indirect*.³⁰

Second, it is a truism that to a very significant extent we get our “values” and other normative standards from the company we keep. The same can be said for our *comfort level* with these values. Suppose I harbor considerable animosity toward my colleague Jones. If the majority of my other colleagues feel the same way about Jones, then I am likely to feel at ease with and be unlikely to address my own attitude toward him. If, on the other hand, my colleagues tend to think very well of Jones, then my dislike of him is likely to be a source of discomfort for me, and I am considerably more likely to question it and try to repudiate it. Accordingly, if we desire to become more open-minded, intellectually fair, honest, or the like, then we must choose

to surround ourselves with people who embody (or at least *value*) these qualities; and we must seek to avoid the company of those that are narrow, dogmatic, intellectually uncharitable, dishonest, and so on. Our selection of social environment is critical to our prospects of becoming more open-minded.

Third, if we wish to cultivate open-mindedness, it is also critical that we make specific intentional *efforts* to this end. I think here of the apostle Paul's remark that he "buffets" or "disciplines" his body "lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27). Implicit in this remark, I take it, is the idea that if we wish to achieve certain inner qualities, we must undertake specific actions or "exercises" that will help bring these qualities about.³¹ In a similar vein, Aristotle says that to cultivate a particular virtue, one must repeatedly practice (even if imperfectly) the activity specific to or characteristic of this virtue. What might this look like in connection with open-mindedness? In general, the idea is that we must make repeated efforts to practice the kind of cognitive "detaching" or "transcending" described above. This is likely to be no small challenge, since we are often deeply attached to those beliefs which, on reflection, we recognize as presenting an opportunity for greater open-mindedness.

But what, more specifically, might such efforts amount to? The following is but one of a wide range of potential examples. Suppose I have some rather strong beliefs regarding a certain political issue X, but that I recognize that my grounds for my beliefs about X are not conclusive, and indeed, that my possession of these beliefs is probably attributable more to the community in which I was raised than to any careful or thorough examination of the relevant evidence. Out of an interest in becoming more open-minded, I might choose to expose myself to one or more of the better, more in depth defenses of the perspective on X that I reject. This might involve committing to read an entire book by one of the better respected proponents of the relevant view,

regularly visiting a website at which this view is discussed and defended by other intelligent, well-motivated inquirers, or some such activity.³² As I engage in this activity, I might also pose the following sorts of questions to myself: What temptations am I experiencing to ignore, distort, or otherwise exhibit a “closed” mind toward the perspective I am considering? How do I *feel* when I am reading the relevant material? Am I irritated? Do I rush to get to the end of the chapter or article? Can I see how an intelligent, well-meaning person might be led to disagree with me about X? Am I able to accept this fact? Or does it make me feel uncomfortable? My answers to these questions are, at a minimum, likely to give me a sense of *how far I have to go* before I am as open-minded as I would like to be. Nonetheless, if pursued and practiced repeatedly, and especially if done so out of a firm and sincere desire to become more open-minded (or to become a more virtuous “inquirer” or a better lover of my friends or enemies), exercises of this sort are likely to have a significant and favorable impact on my character.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, I think that if we are to be open-minded in the truest, deepest, or most Christian sense, we must possess a well-grounded understanding and acceptance of the central tenets of the Christian faith together with a rich and meaningful spiritual life. As noted above, the sort of open-mindedness that flows from Christian love is not blind or self-effacing; it does not amount to an arbitrary or irrational casting of ourselves or our beliefs at the feet of our intellectual adversaries. Rather, it comes from a place of deep intellectual confidence and nearness to God. A person whose Christian beliefs, say, are not well-grounded or who in her “heart of hearts” harbors significant (unwelcome) doubts about them, is likely to have a difficult time being at all open-minded about these beliefs—let alone being open-minded in the deeper or truly Christian sense. Instead, she is likely to be anxious, irritable, defensive, and arrogant in the face of challenges to her beliefs. Likewise, a person whose grasp

of his Christian beliefs is firm and well-informed may, while perhaps possessing the confidence and courage to be open-minded, nonetheless be *uninclined* to do so, for he might lack the kind of concern or love for his neighbor that would lead him to give a respectful, open-minded hearing to his neighbor's beliefs. On one plausible account, the richest source of such love is an intimate, experiential relationship with the One who *is* love. Philosopher and Theologian Richard Mouw makes a similar point in connection with Christian "civility," which he says entails a kind of curiosity and empathy regarding others' beliefs: "We keep coming back to this point: we live in the presence of God. We cannot consistently develop empathy and curiosity and teachability in our relationships without the reinforcing experiences of divine grace. We can sustain open hearts toward others only because of the love that flows from the heart of God."³³ What this suggests, then, is that the Christian's pursuit of greater open-mindedness should include attempts to better understand and know the foundations of her faith and to cultivate a rich and active spiritual life. In this regard, the process of becoming open-minded, when pursued with Christian aims and motivation, has deeply theological and spiritual dimensions.³⁴

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¹ *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay In Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 188. Roberts and Wood do not endorse this way of thinking about open-mindedness. Their immediate concern is the virtue of intellectual firmness, a virtue that complements genuine open-mindedness.

² While related to the first misgiving, the present worry about open-mindedness is distinct. For one thing, it presupposes that the person in question thinks of himself as already possessing the truth. The first misgiving makes no such assumption, since one could be opposed to wishy-washy thinking about a given subject matter (or in general) even if one did not think of oneself as already possessing the truth about this subject matter (or in general). Furthermore, the present misgiving focuses on the (alleged) negative *consequences* of open-mindedness. But a disapproval of wishy-washy thinking need not be consequentialist in nature: one might object to such thinking on the grounds that it is *irrational* and that irrationality is an *intrinsically* bad intellectual state.

³ Other intellectual virtues might be relevant here as well—for instance, curiosity or perseverance. However, the point is that there may be students that are curious (perseverant, etc.) but that, in order to grasp the subject matter, still need to “stretch their minds” or “think outside the box” in a manner characteristic of open-mindedness. Anything less than open-mindedness may be insufficient for cognitive success in this case.

⁴ Of course, upon grasping the theory, the students might immediately proceed to attempt to evaluate it, and open-mindedness might be relevant here as well. But the former application of open-mindedness would be distinct from the latter.

⁵ There is a kind of “disagreement” or (apparent) lack of rational coherence among the data, but this is not the sort of disagreement we are concerned with; nor is open-mindedness needed to “move between” or adjudicate these data.

⁶ While closely related to understanding or comprehension, the kind of “conceiving” I have in mind here is prior and distinct. The detective, for instance, might seek to *understand* or *comprehend* the details of a particular theory *after* he conceives of it—the latter being his immediate focus. Indeed, his attempt to comprehend the theory *presupposes* his already having conceived of or identified it in the relevant sense.

⁷ These are not intended as jointly *sufficient* conditions for open-mindedness, at least not if open-mindedness is to be considered a genuine *virtue*. To be a virtue, the relevant disposition must, on my view, be rooted in a certain good or admirable motivation. More on this momentarily.

⁸ Of course, it might arise immediately thereafter, since, again, one might move from an open-minded “taking up” of a particular perspective to an evaluation or assessment of this perspective.

⁹ A similar point holds for the detective case. Open-mindedness is relevant to the detective’s attempt to *imagine* or *conceive* of a particular explanation; the detective is not (at present) trying

to assess any explanation. Of course, recognizing that an explanation *could* account for a certain data set amounts to an evaluation of some sort (for presumably not every proposed explanation would have this quality). I am thinking of “assessment” or “evaluation” in somewhat narrower terms, however—terms that presuppose the *possibility* or *possible truth* of the explanation or other item being assessed.

¹⁰ However, the required ability in question has its limits. For if a person were able and willing, in the ways just described, to engage in the activity characteristic of open-mindedness, but were prevented from doing so by some *external* source, then it might still make sense to think of this person as open-minded. Here, the inability is a matter of bad luck—it is beyond the control of the agent.

¹¹ I qualify this claim in a limited way below. See the section “Open-mindedness and Faith.” It is worth noting that in the sort of case just described, I would indeed have a *semblance* of open-mindedness or be open-minded to a *degree*. But again, my concern here is with a version or kind of open-mindedness that at least stands a chance of counting as a genuine *excellence*; and it is doubtful that whatever kind of open-mindedness I might exhibit in the example just noted fits this description.

¹² This requirement is discussed in more depth in the sections that follow.

¹³ I say “characteristically” rather than “necessarily” mainly because I want to leave open the possibility that the sort of open-mindedness I am interested in might be motivated by other valuable ends. In the section that follows, I explain, for instance, that it might be motivated by a kind of neighbor- or enemy-love.

¹⁴ Clearly this—or any similar—motivation is not necessary for open-mindedness *per se*, which is why the present point is not included in the foregoing *definition* of open-mindedness. A person

could be open-minded, even in a reasonably “deep” or habitual sense, for the sake of other, far less noble ends—for example, because she wants to be well-liked or because she sees being open-minded as necessary for winning a certain prize. I exclude such cases from my present characterization since, again, my aim is to identify a kind or variety of open-mindedness that at least stands a chance of qualifying as a Christian *virtue*.

¹⁵ *Collected Works*, vol. 16 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 212.

¹⁶ Special thanks to Michael Pace for several helpful discussions about the content of this section.

¹⁷ A possible exception here, which will be developed in more detail momentarily, is open-mindedness motivated by a kind of Christian love. Here open-mindedness may not be directed strictly at beliefs that the open-minded person has reason to think might be true. However, in this manifestation, open-mindedness is hardly wishy-washy, especially when considered from a Christian standpoint. I say considerably more about when exactly it is appropriate to manifest open-mindedness in my “The Structure of Open-Mindedness,” unpublished.

¹⁸ This is at least partly because our deeply held beliefs are central to our identities or self-conceptions, such that to have them disrespected or disregarded is to be disrespected ourselves.

¹⁹ I do not want to deny that contexts of the sort in question might also call for a kind of intellectual *courage*. Indeed, it might take courage to be open-minded in such contexts. What I do wish to deny is that a genuine Christian courage might license closed-minded or dogmatic ways of engaging with our intellectual enemies. Also, the “Christian reasons” in question are not necessarily overriding, for among the beliefs that we ought to be open-minded about is the belief that we might be mistaken about our Christian beliefs.

²⁰ For a recent treatment of this theme, see Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

²¹ This kind of case illustrates a potential tension, noted above, between a desire for truth and Christian love. This tension is not a problem, however, unless one thinks (implausibly) that a desire for truth should always trump the demands of Christian love.

²² For more on this topic, see Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford, 2000), Abraham Kuyper, *The Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), and Merold Westphal, "Taking St. Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category," in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 200-226. See Jonathan Adler, "Reconciling Open-Mindedness and Belief," *Theory and Research in Education* 2, pp. 127-42, for a more general, non-theological account of how an acceptance of cognitive fallibility is relevant to open-mindedness.

²³ Important questions can be raised pertaining to when exactly an open-minded inquiry might "call for" or "demand" the repudiation of a particular belief. One such question concerns the epistemic threshold a belief must meet if one is to be justified in *holding onto* (not repudiating) it. For instance, must a belief have positive evidential support? Or might it be "properly basic"? The position I am defending here is intended to be neutral with respect to this question (and with respect to the philosophical views that lie behind it). For present purposes, it will suffice to say that, on the view I am defending, an open-minded inquiry calls for the repudiation of a belief just in case it yields a *defeater* relative to this belief. This is something that evidentialists and Reformed epistemologists should be able to agree upon.

²⁴ In fact, it might even be said that (to the extent that God disapproves of dishonesty) the Christian has a special obligation to give up her Christian beliefs if she finds that the evidence is

stacked against them. But there is, of course, a paradox here, since as soon as she gives up her Christian beliefs, she (presumably) is no longer a Christian, and therefore no longer has the reasons in question! I will not stop to pursue this point here, except to say that the paradox is not unique to Christian or any other kind of religious belief. A similar problem arises in connection with philosophical skepticism, for example, when one is led to doubt the reliability of sense perception based on beliefs that arise from sense perception or when reason itself leads one to be skeptical about the reliability of reason.

²⁵ Again, I will not attempt to say what exactly counts as “adequate support”; however, in this case, I do think it involves having some *positive* evidential support (that is, it is not enough that the belief in question be “properly basic” and that one lack any defeaters for this belief).

²⁶ Something like this principle is at work in some fairly standard philosophical ways of thinking about knowledge and rationality. For instance, it is often held (roughly) that if a scientific theory T is on the whole well-confirmed, it takes more in the way of empirical counterevidence to “dislodge” or refute the more central or integral elements of T than it does those elements that are less central or that are, as it were, on the “periphery” of T. The corresponding point about rational or justified belief is that it takes more (by way of counterevidence) to defeat the justification of a belief in the integral elements of T than it does the more peripheral elements. While Quine famously argued in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (*From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 20-47) that *no* belief (not even the most central or integral) is immune to empirical refutation, he presumably accepted the much weaker principle just noted. See also Imre Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes,” *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, eds. Lakatos and Alan

Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91-96. Thanks to Tim Shanahan for the latter reference.

²⁷ I may, however, need to reduce my confidence level regarding P.

²⁸ This talk of “adjusting” confidence levels or “repudiating” beliefs raises the question of whether the present view presupposes an implausible doxastic voluntarism. I believe it does not: first, because I think it is clear that for the most part we have *enough* (at least *indirect*) control over our beliefs and confidence levels to satisfy the requirements I am defending; and second, because, where a person happens to lack such control, I think the relevant normative judgments may still be warranted. Concerning the latter point, if a person is *so* dogmatic or clings *so* tightly to *every one* of his Christian beliefs that he simply *cannot* bring himself to revise these beliefs in the light of counterevidence that comes his way, I think we are right to view his clinging to the relevant beliefs as unjustified or irrational—despite the fact that he has no real control over them.

²⁹ Here again I am sidestepping the question of exactly what epistemic standard a belief must satisfy before it qualifies as intellectually dishonest or before open-mindedness might require giving it up. See note 23 above.

³⁰ One can, of course, will to *try* to become more open-minded, patient, or courageous. But, alas, this is hardly sufficient for actually *becoming* virtuous in these ways.

³¹ For a comprehensive and masterful treatment of this issue, see Willard 1988.

³² Such a commitment will have its intended effect, however, only if I am properly equipped to assess the relevant views in a competent and rational way. This underscores the importance of training in formal and informal logic, particularly within the Christian community.

³³ *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 69. Thanks to Bob Covolo for directing me to Mouw’s book, which,

while about Christian “civility,” contains a great deal of insight about the importance of open-mindedness from a Christian standpoint.

³⁴ Thanks to Doug Geivett for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. Thanks also to Michael Pace and Dan Speak for helpful conversations about the topics discussed herein.