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The Structure of Open-Mindedness

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Open-mindedness enjoys widespread recognition as an intellectual virtue. It makes an appearance, for instance, on nearly every list of intellectual virtues in the virtue epistemology literature.¹ Despite its popularity, however, it is far from clear what exactly open-mindedness amounts to: that is, what sort of intellectual orientation or activity is essential to it. In fact, there are ways of thinking about open-mindedness that cast serious doubt on its status as an intellectual virtue.

Consider the following description, from Robert Roberts and Jay Wood (2007), of a “bright college freshman, taking an introductory course in philosophy.” Given this student’s “taste for ideas,”

she 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. (188)

Roberts and Wood cite this as an example of intellectual “flaccidity,” but it also illustrates a certain (less than virtuous) kind or variety of open-mindedness—the kind, for instance, that tends to inspire utterances of the familiar (and cynical) admonition: “Don’t be so open-minded that your brains fall out.”

I do not wish to deny that there are instances or varieties of open-mindedness that are *not* intellectual virtues. Nonetheless, it is extremely plausible to think there is a genuine and important intellectual virtue in the vicinity of these traits that merits the label of “open-mindedness.” My aim in this paper is to go some way toward uncovering the defining character of this virtue. My immediate focus will be that which is distinctive of this virtue as compared with *other* intellectual virtues—*not* the qualities that make this trait an intellectual virtue *per se* or that it has in common with other intellectual virtues.² In addition to sketching an account of the basic character and structure of open-mindedness, I shall also briefly address two further issues: first, the characteristic function of open-mindedness vis-à-vis other intellectual virtues; and second, the issue of when (or to whom or how much) an exercise of open-mindedness is intellectually appropriate or virtuous. The latter question in particular merits a lengthier treatment than I can give it here; nonetheless, I hope to be able to shed at least some light on the largely practical concern that motivates it.

1. Some Initial Characterizations of Open-Mindedness

I begin by considering some initially plausible proposals concerning open-mindedness and proceed to point out ways in which these proposals are unsatisfactory. This will set the stage for a more plausible characterization of open-mindedness in the section that follows.

Whatever its fundamental nature or structure, it is tempting to think of open-mindedness as essentially relevant to situations involving intellectual conflict, opposition, challenge, or argument, and in particular, to situations involving a conflict between a person’s beliefs, on the

one hand, and an opposing position, argument, or body of evidence, on the other.³ Here an open-minded person characteristically moves beyond or temporarily sets aside his own doxastic commitments in order to give a fair and impartial hearing to the intellectual opposition. He is willing to follow the argument where it leads and to take evidence and reasons at face value. He does not ignore, distort, or caricature opposing positions. He is not narrow-minded, dogmatic, or biased. While he may possess many firm and closely held convictions, his hold on them does not prevent him from giving serious consideration to the “other side.”

An example of open-mindedness thus conceived is the fictional protagonist of C.P. Snow’s 1934 novel *The Search*. Arthur Miles is a young and ambitious Cambridge scientist conducting groundbreaking research in crystallography. At one point in the narrative, he appears to have made a major discovery that seems bound to catapult him into scientific stardom. But shortly thereafter, a critical piece of counterevidence appears on one of his x-ray films. Initially, Miles tries to resist the force of this new datum:

I hunted round for another explanation: the film might be a false one, it might be a fluke experiment; but the look of it mocked me: far from being false, it was the only experiment where I had arrived at precisely the right conditions. Could it be explained any other way? I stared down at the figures, the sheets of results which I had forced into my scheme. My cheeks flushing dry, I tried to work this new photograph into my idea. An improbable assumption, another improbable assumption, a possibility of experimental error – I went on, fantastically, any sort of criticism forgotten. Still it would not fit. I was wrong, irrevocably wrong. I should have to begin again.

While Miles initially yields to the counterevidence, his surrender is incomplete, for he subsequently entertains the possibility of destroying the offending slide. Upon still further deliberation, however, he acquiesces to a nobler inclination:

I was swung back ... by all the forms of – shall I call it ‘conscience’ – and perhaps more than that, by the desire which had thrown me into the search. For I had to get what I myself thought was the truth. Honour, comfort and ambition were bound to move me, but I think my own desire went deepest. Without any posturing to myself, without any sort of conscious thought, I laughed at the temptation to destroy the photograph. Rather shakily I laughed. And I wrote in my notebook: ‘Mar. 30: Photograph 3 alone has secondary dots, concentric with major dots. This removes all possibility of the hypothesis of structure B. The interpretation from Mar. 4-30 must accordingly be disregarded.’ (92-93)

Miles is no epistemic saint. He clearly feels the temptation to ignore, distort, even to destroy evidence that runs counter to his hypothesis. In the end, however, he chooses to confront, take seriously, and alter his doxastic attitudes in light of this evidence. And he does so out of a motivation definitive of intellectual virtue: namely, a compelling or overriding desire to get to the truth.

This initial characterization suggests the following account of open-mindedness: *open-mindedness is essentially a willingness or ability to temporarily set aside one’s doxastic commitments about a particular matter in order to give a fair and impartial hearing to an opposing belief, argument, or body of evidence*. Because it portrays a conflict between an open-minded person’s beliefs and some alternative belief or source of information as essential to an exercise of open-mindedness, let us refer to this as the “conflict model” of open-mindedness.

While initially plausible, the conflict model is inadequate as a general account of open-mindedness. This is because an exercise of open-mindedness (1) need not involve the setting aside or suspending of any beliefs; and (2) it need not need not presuppose any kind of conflict

or disagreement between an open-minded person's beliefs and the object of her open-mindedness. Both (1) and (2) are attributable to the fact that open-mindedness can be manifested in situations in which the person in question is *neutral* with respect to the items being assessed.

Imagine, for instance, an honest and impartial judge preparing to hear the opening arguments in a given trial. The judge has no prior opinions or biases about any part of the case; nor does she have any stake in its outcome. There is, then, no conflict between the beliefs of the judge and the beliefs or arguments she is preparing to hear. Nonetheless, it is plausible to think that the judge might listen to the arguments in an open-minded way or that she might conduct an open-minded inquiry into the case. The latter might take the form of giving a careful and protracted hearing to the full range of arguments on both sides of the case prior to allowing herself to form an opinion about it or to be swayed in one direction or another.⁴ If this is possible, then open-mindedness is not essentially or necessarily a matter of setting aside one's doxastic commitments in order to give a fair or impartial hearing to the intellectual opposition. For again, there is no doxastic conflict or disagreement between the judge and the arguments she is preparing to evaluate; she does not yet agree with, nor does she have any antecedent inclination to favor, one "side" or the other. In cases of this sort, open-mindedness manifests instead in something like *a willingness to hear both sides of an issue, to follow the relevant arguments where they lead, or to refrain from making hasty or premature judgments.*

The difference between the two applications of open-mindedness considered thus far is evident in connection with the intellectual *vices* that correspond to each application. In the context of intellectual conflict or opposition, open-mindedness is the antidote to vices like narrow-mindedness, closed-mindedness, dogmatism, prejudice, and bias. But such vices are less relevant to situations in which a person is neutral or undecided about the matter being assessed. The judge, for instance, is unlikely to be closed-minded, dogmatic, or prejudiced in her assessment of the relevant case, since again, she has nothing at stake in it. In this context, the corresponding vices include traits like intellectual hastiness, impatience, and laziness. For these defects may prevent a person from listening to both sides of an issue, taking each side seriously, or avoiding hasty or premature conclusions.

In a book on religious conversion, Emilie Griffin (1982) describes the initial stage of her own conversion in terms suggestive of the latter application of open-mindedness. She describes this period as involving an ongoing dialectic between atheistic and theistic arguments:

Often, when I felt myself becoming convinced or persuaded by believers, I ran from that and deliberately plunged myself into the opposite point of view. I knew the emotional power which Christianity had for me, but I did not want to be overcome by that. So, from time to time, perhaps not consciously, I administered an antidote. When I went to the writings of atheists, it was not only for the sake of being fair-minded; the fact was that I did not know from which direction clarity or resolution of my difficult questions would come. (97)

On the one hand, given her admitted attraction to Christianity, Griffin may not appear very neutral with respect to the relevant subject matter. But if we take at face value her claim that she had not yet made up her mind and did not yet know what the outcome of her inquiry would be, her intellectual activity illustrates how open-mindedness can manifest outside of a context of intellectual opposition or disagreement—and within that of open inquiry. Griffin examines both sides of the issue, gives each serious consideration, and does not rush to judgment or draw premature conclusions. As such, her inquiry bears the marks of open-mindedness.⁵

We have seen that open-mindedness cannot be identified with a disposition to set aside one's beliefs in order to give a fair and impartial consideration to an opposing position, argument, or body of evidence. Nevertheless, both applications of open-mindedness considered thus far have at least two things in common that may be thought to take us some way toward a grasp of the essential character of open-mindedness. First, both involve intellectual conflict or opposition of one form or another. In the first sort of case described above, the conflict is between the open-minded person's beliefs and some alternative belief or source of information. In the second, it is between two or more competing positions about which the open-minded person is presently neutral or undecided. Second, both of the relevant applications of open-mindedness involve some kind of rational assessment or evaluation of one or more of the conflicting items. Again, in the first kind of case, an open-minded person assesses a belief or argument that stands in opposition to one of his beliefs. And in the second, he assesses multiple competing positions, none of which he presently accepts or rejects. This suggests the following, alternative account of open-mindedness: *open-mindedness is essentially a matter of assessing one or more sides of an intellectual dispute in a fair and impartial way.* Call this the "adjudication model" of open-mindedness.

While an improvement on the conflict model in some respects, the adjudication model is still too restrictive. This is because open-mindedness can be manifested (1) in situations void of any (relevant) intellectual conflict or disagreement and (2) in intellectual activity *other* than rational assessment or evaluation.⁶ To begin see how, imagine a physics teacher who has just led a group of bright high school students through a unit on Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. Most of the students have managed to follow the teacher's lessons and thus have achieved a basic understanding of the theory. In the final part of the course, the teacher intends to push his students a significant step further by introducing them to Einstein's General Theory. This is bound to pose a major challenge for most of the students in the class. It will require an even more dramatic departure (compared with the Special Theory) from their usual ways of thinking about space, time, physical laws, velocity, frames of reference, and the like.

Here again it is extremely plausible to think that the persons in question might benefit from a kind of open-mindedness. This trait might help them "wrap their minds" around certain otherwise incomprehensible scientific or metaphysical proposals. Indeed, we can easily imagine the teacher saying to them something like: "Okay, for this next unit, I need you to really *open your minds*—to loosen your grip even further on some of your ordinary and commonsense ways of thinking about the world around you." If this is right, then an exercise of open-mindedness need not involve any kind of intellectual dispute or disagreement. For Einstein's General Theory is not at odds or in competition with his Special Theory; rather, it is a natural (if complex and mind-bending) extension of it.

This example also shows that open-mindedness does not necessarily involve rational assessment. For the students are not attempting to assess or evaluate Einstein's General Theory. At this stage, they are simply trying to *follow* or to *understand* it. This shows that open-mindedness, while at times bearing on the activity of rational assessment or evaluation, can also bear on other intellectual activities or operations: for instance, on the process of coming to understand or comprehend a certain foreign or challenging subject matter.

Nor is this the only alternative activity or operation on which open-mindedness might be brought to bear. Again, the students just described are attempting to follow their teacher's lead—that, while they do want to "understand for themselves," there is a clear sense in which they are not attempting to "think for themselves." Again, there is fixed subject matter before them and

their aim is to wrap their minds around it—to *grasp* it. By contrast, imagine a detective attempting to solve an especially confounding case. His investigation of the case is complete: he has examined the crime scene in painstaking detail, studied the forensic reports, interviewed all the witnesses, followed up on possible suspects, and so on; he is in possession of all of the relevant facts. And yet he is stumped. He cannot conceive of a coherent explanation of the full range of evidence. Some of the evidence points to a certain suspect and sequence of events, while other parts of it seem to exonerate this suspect and to suggest an alternative sequence of events. At some level, the detective’s aim is to understand what happened, to comprehend how the crime unfolded, who did what, and so on. Prior to achieving such understanding, however, the detective must do something else: he must attempt to *imagine* or *conceive* of a coherent explanation of the relevant data. He must engage in a kind of creative thinking, imagining, or hypothesizing. This is likely to require a kind of generative intellectual strength and autonomy that is not required of the physics students, who again are attempting merely to comprehend a body of information that has already been worked out and presented to them by their teacher.⁷

Such activity is clearly relevant to the practice of (if less so to the study or attempts to comprehend) science and other disciplines. Success in these areas often requires rigorous, autonomous, and creative thinking.⁸ Einstein himself described advances in scientific thinking as involving a quasi-artistic, “sudden illumination” and “great forward leap of the imagination.”⁹ The more immediate point, however, is that activity of this sort might very well be facilitated or enhanced by an exercise of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness might help a person conceive of or imagine certain otherwise inscrutable or unidentifiable possibilities or explanations.

Griffin’s (1982) discussion of religious conversion also provides an example of this application or bearing of open-mindedness. She describes conversion as often involving “fits and starts of insight and illumination”:

What seems to happen is that a number of ideas and arguments are collected from various sources; the mind works away at them; then, sometimes in a sudden burst of energy, a sorting and ordering occurs not sequentially, but all at once. Things fall into patterns. Even before the last piece is fitted into the jigsaw, the picture of the mountain can be seen taking shape. Then, with exhilaration, the mind rushes to complete the picture. (72)

Griffin illustrates this point with the conversion of the late Jesuit contemplative Avery Dulles: So in a brief moment—standing beside a tree on the rainy bank of the Charles—Dulles was able to integrate into one vision of reality much that he had already absorbed from the ancient philosophers—Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle—and from later thinkers, Augustine among them. But this moment of insight was rationally based; it came about after Dulles had been engaged for some time in the dialectical process; now it became possible for Dulles to “see”—in a whole, clear vision—what till then he had only been thinking about. (74)

Griffin adds that it was “the *disposition of his mind*, its *openness*, which made the insight possible. It was his yearning that stirred the working of his mind and moved him towards the drawing of conclusions” (75; my italics). As Griffin describes it, Dulles’ insight, his identification of (what was for him) a new explanatory framework, was made possible in part by his open-mindedness, which in turn was motivated by a deeper intellectual “yearning,” presumably a yearning for knowledge or understanding.

To summarize, we have seen, first, that despite the initial plausibility of such a view, open-mindedness cannot be identified with a disposition to set aside one’s beliefs about a particular issue in order to consider some opposing viewpoint or piece of evidence (the conflict

model). This is because open-mindedness can be manifested by individuals that are neutral or undecided about the views or arguments they are considering. Second, we have seen that neither is open-mindedness necessarily a matter of making a fair or impartial assessment of one or more sides of an intellectual dispute or disagreement with respect to which one may be neutral (the adjudication model). For it can bear on situations in which there is no disagreement and on activity that is void of rational evaluation or assessment (for example, on attempts to understand a difficult subject matter or to conceive of an explanation of a perplexing body of evidence).

2. Open-Mindedness: A Unified Account

The discussion up to this point has left us with a rather disparate range of applications and examples of open-mindedness. The main point of the paper, however, is to shed light on the essential or defining character of open-mindedness. We must, then, confront the question of whether a unified account of open-mindedness is possible. That is, we must attempt to determine what, if anything, the foregoing instances or applications of open-mindedness have in common that *make* them instances of open-mindedness. This is no small or insignificant task. For, if we cannot identify a common ingredient in the various examples and illustrations noted above—and one that can reasonably be viewed as definitive of open-mindedness in particular—it may appear that in fact we have been concerned with an assortment of fundamentally distinct traits. I turn now to address this challenge.

2.1. The conceptual core of open-mindedness

We can begin by drawing attention to one reasonably salient feature of each of the cases of open-mindedness discussed above. In each case, a person *departs* or *detaches* from, he or she *moves beyond* or *transcends*, a certain default or privileged cognitive standpoint. Consider first the application of open-mindedness to situations involving intellectual disagreement or conflict. We said that here an open-minded person is (roughly) one who is able to set aside or loosen his grip on his belief that P in order to consider or take seriously the case for not-P. Intuitively, it is this cognitive “moving beyond” or transcending of the person’s doxastic commitments, a willingness to consider things from the other side, that makes the activity in question an instance of open-mindedness.

Next consider the bearing of open-mindedness on attempts to understand or imagine. Recall, for instance, the physics students attempting to wrap their minds around Einstein’s General Theory. To the extent that their attempts to understand the theory are facilitated by open-mindedness, this is likely to involve a willingness and ability to transcend familiar or default ways of thinking about the basic structure of reality. Recall as well the detective attempting to make coherent sense of a baffling and seemingly incoherent set of data. Again, open-mindedness might enable this person to be “open” to and hence to identify or conceive of explanations that would otherwise be out of reach for him.

This leaves the application of open-mindedness to situations involving “impartial adjudication,” that is, to situations in which the person in question is adjudicating between two or more competing positions about which she is presently undecided or neutral. Here the relevant “departing” or “transcending,” which I am claiming is the conceptual core of open-mindedness, is more complex and less apparent. To see why, recall the case of the open-minded judge preparing to hear a set of opposing arguments. We said that while the judge may not have anything at stake (cognitive or otherwise) in the outcome of the case, she might still listen in an open-minded way to the relevant arguments or conduct an open-minded assessment of them. Again, in situations like this open-mindedness involves a willingness to listen to both sides of an issue, to follow the arguments or evidence where they lead, and to refrain from bringing the

inquiry to a hasty or premature conclusion. But in what sense, if any, does this involve moving beyond, detaching from, or transcending a default or privileged cognitive standpoint? And even if it were to involve as much, could this plausibly explain why the activity in question is an instance of open-mindedness?

There are, in fact, at least three distinct ways in which the activity in question might involve a kind of detaching from a default cognitive standpoint. First, to the extent that this activity is a matter of assessing the relative merits of two or more positions *neither of which one presently accepts*, it might involve entertaining or giving one's mind to a previously unconsidered possibility or standpoint, which in turn might require a kind of intellectual "opening" or transcending of one's present cognitive perspective. And where this is the case—for instance, where a person is assessing two competing positions in connection with an issue to which she previously has given very little thought—it is not implausible to think that the transcending or detaching in question might amount to a kind of open-mindedness.

Second, to adjudicate between two or more competing positions in an open-minded way, one must at a certain level be able to *move back and forth between the positions in question*: to compare and contrast their meaning, to understand the logical relations between them, and to assess their respective strengths and weaknesses. This opens up the possibility that one might get stuck or hung up in one's assessment of one or more of these positions. Having focused intently on the merits of one set of arguments, the judge, for instance, might find herself unwilling or unable to turn to or reorient her attention on the opposing set. And it is reasonable to think that this unwillingness or inability might be due to a lack of open-mindedness on the judge's part. This, then, suggests a second way in which the kind of cognitive detaching characteristic of open-mindedness might be manifested in the context of impartial adjudication.

A third way is evident in cases in which a person resists the temptation to make a hasty generalization or to draw a premature conclusion. For in doing so, this person is, as it were, keeping his distance from a certain (premature, hasty, or "closed") cognitive standpoint; he is "keeping an open mind."

There are, however, some noteworthy differences between this manifestation of open-mindedness and the other two just identified. In the two cases just noted, for instance, open-mindedness is manifested in a kind of *positive* psychological activity. Where an open-minded adjudicator shifts, say, from focusing intently on one position to a consideration of a competing position, he *moves beyond* his present standpoint to entertain an alternative standpoint. In the present case, however, open-mindedness has a *negative* character: it consists in *refraining* from taking up an alternative cognitive standpoint (which again is the standpoint represented by the hasty or premature judgment). This illustrates the important point that while open-mindedness is often a matter of positively opening one's mind, it is sometimes a matter of *not closing it*.

This might initially seem counterintuitive. It might seem strange, that is, to think that open-mindedness could consist in resisting or refusing to take up an alternative cognitive standpoint. The explanation, however, lies with the fact that the *default* or *privileged* cognitive standpoint in this case is different from what it is in most other cases. In the typical case, the default standpoint is one that the person in question presently occupies or accepts; and indeed, it is the fact that the person occupies it that accounts for its default status. In the present case, however, the default or privileged standpoint is the one that the person is *tempted* by or *inclined* to take up. And it is this fact—the fact that the person is tempted or inclined to adopt the standpoint in question—that makes the standpoint a default or privileged one. The result is that

open-mindedness, in cases like this, consists in detaching (or remaining detached) from a forward-looking or hypothetical standpoint rather than a standpoint that one presently occupies.

Before turning to offer a definition of open-mindedness based on the foregoing characterization, it is important to add that whether a particular instance of cognitive “detaching” or “transcending” counts as an instance of open-mindedness depends in part on the immediate *motivation* behind it. Imagine a person who sets aside or moves beyond one of his beliefs in order to assess an argument against this belief, but who has no real intention of making an honest or fair assessment of this argument (he just wants to get the attention of his interlocutor, say). Intuitively, this person is not genuinely open-minded. And the reason, it seems, is that he is not committed to *taking seriously* the opposing argument. This suggests that where open-mindedness involves assessing one or more competing views, it necessarily involves doing so with the aim of giving these views a “serious” (i.e. fair, honest, objective) hearing or assessment.¹⁰ This reveals that a certain immediate motivation is partly constitutive of open-mindedness.

2.2. A definition of open-mindedness

We are now in a position to consider a more general and formal characterization of open-mindedness. I propose the following account:

(OM) An open-minded person is characteristically (a) willing and (within limits) able (b) to transcend a default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint.

Parts (b) through (d) of the definition mainly summarize the key points of the discussion up to this point and thus I will not elaborate on them here.¹¹

Part (a), however, deals with an aspect of open-mindedness that we have yet to consider. Specifically, it concerns whether open-mindedness should be understood as a disposition of the *will* or to what extent it might also involve a kind of reliable *ability* or *capacity*. That open-mindedness is at least partly constituted by a disposition of the will seems clear enough. If a person is able, say, to set aside her commitment to P in order to assess some prima facie compelling evidence for not-P, but is *unwilling* to do so, then presumably she is not open-minded. It may be thought, in fact, that open-mindedness is nothing more than a willingness to engage in the intellectual activity in question. But this is not quite right. Suppose that a person has been brainwashed by her community concerning a particular matter such that while she is willing, and perhaps *thinks* herself able, to detach from the “accepted” way of thinking about this matter and to assess it in an impartial and objective way, she is in fact constitutionally *incapable* of doing so; despite her willingness, she simply cannot think “outside the box.” This person cannot be considered open-minded.¹²

Now consider a person who is willing to set aside her usual way of thinking about something in order to consider an opposed way, whose cognitive constitution does not rule this out, but who nonetheless is prevented from doing so on account of certain “external” factors (perhaps her community has destroyed all information concerning the opposed way of thinking and will severely punish anyone suspected of trying to learn about it). This person, I take it, *could* reasonably be regarded as open-minded.

The difference between these two cases apparently lies with the source of the agents’ inability to think in the relevant way. In the latter case, this inability is entirely (or at least relevantly) external to the person’s agency. In the initial case, however, the corresponding inability, while not the agent’s fault, is a function of her agency, at least in the sense that presently, on account of her own cognitive or psychological constitution, she is unable to think or reason in the way in question. Accordingly, we should think of open-mindedness as

constituted both by a willingness and an ability, but only where the ability is understood in the relevant “internal” terms.

Two additional issues concerning (OM) need to be addressed. The first is a potential objection. In certain cases, it may seem possible for a person to satisfy the conditions of (OM) while failing to instantiate the character trait of open-mindedness. Suppose, for instance, that while looking through some of my family’s genealogical materials, I run across some counterevidence for my belief that my paternal grandparents migrated from Germany to Wisner, Nebraska. The evidence suggests instead that they migrated to nearby Wayne. Is confronting the evidence in this case likely to make demands on my intellectual character? Is it likely to require an exercise of open-mindedness on my part? This is at least questionable. If nothing is riding on this issue for me, and if I immediately (with little or no thought or deliberation) change my mind about the matter, then presumably there will not be anything particularly “open-minded” about my doxastic activity.

This suggests the need for a further requirement of open-mindedness. It might be thought, for instance, that (OM) should be supplemented with a proviso to the effect that the kind of activity it describes is expressive of open-mindedness only when it occurs within the context of an intellectual *challenge*. Alternatively, we might say that open-mindedness is a matter of transcending a default cognitive standpoint *where doing so makes a significant demand on a person’s agency*. On the other hand, it is important not to set the bar too high for an exercise of open-mindedness (or any other character trait). More specifically, it is important to allow for relatively easy and spontaneous displays of open-mindedness, particularly because such displays are likely to be especially common among those who are most open-minded (that is, those for whom open-minded intellectual activity is most natural or a matter of “second nature”).

I will not attempt to settle this matter here. At issue is the very difficult question of how to understand the *minimal* demands of an exercise of a character trait or virtue. My own view is that an exercise of an intellectual virtue necessarily makes certain demands on its possessor’s agency. But exactly what these demands are (and whether they are met in the kind of case noted above) is far from obvious. Accordingly, I shall leave it an open question whether (OM) should be modified in the suggested way.¹³

A second issue concerns a rather different way in which a person might satisfy the conditions of (OM) while failing to be genuinely open-minded. Here the worry is limited to cases that involve rational assessment or adjudication of one or more competing views. In cases of this sort, open-mindedness seems necessarily to range, not just over the assessment itself, but also over the open-minded person’s doxastic *response* to this assessment. Suppose I am willing and able to set aside or detach from my commitment to P in order to assess the case for not-P, that as a result of this assessment I conclude that the case for not-P is stronger than I thought and the case for P weaker, but that I fail to adjust my belief or confidence level concerning P accordingly. While I might have the “beginning” of open-mindedness or a small degree of it, surely I am not genuinely or completely open-minded. Accordingly, (OM) must be supplemented by the proviso that *where open-mindedness involves rational assessment or evaluation, it also necessarily involves adjusting one’s beliefs or confidence levels according to the outcome of this assessment*.

This is not, however, a completely general requirement (or necessary condition) of open-mindedness. For in contexts void of rational assessment, there is no question as to whether the person has shown a proper or open-minded doxastic response to such assessment. Where a person manifests open-mindedness in an attempt merely to understand a foreign or difficult

subject matter, for instance, the question does not arise as to whether he has adjusted his beliefs or confidence levels accordingly. He has not sought to assess this subject matter; thus no such response should be expected of him. The additional requirement is, then, applicable only to a limited range of cases.¹⁴

3. Open-Mindedness and Other Cognitive Excellences

At various points in the paper, we have had occasion to refer to cognitive excellences other than open-mindedness. These include other intellectual virtues like intellectual fairness, impartiality, and honesty, as well as certain cognitive abilities or faculties like comprehension, conception, and imagination. We have seen, for instance, that in the face of intellectual opposition or conflict, an open-minded person is likely to move beyond her own convictions to give a serious, fair, and honest assessment to an opposing viewpoint; or that she is likely to be in a better position than someone who lacks open-mindedness to grasp a foreign or abstruse subject matter or to conceive of an explanation of a puzzling collection of evidence.

These connections between open-mindedness and other intellectual excellences give rise to two questions. First, is open-mindedness really anything over and above a disposition to exercise these other excellences? And second, assuming that it is, what exactly is the relationship between open-mindedness and these other traits? I shall address each of these questions in turn. Doing so will provide an even more perspicuous account open-mindedness and its role in the cognitive economy.

It should be fairly clear at this point that open-mindedness cannot be reduced to one or more other intellectual virtues, a mere cognitive capacity, or any nexus thereof. To be sure, open-mindedness is closely related to virtues like intellectual fairness, honesty, impartiality, empathy, patience, adaptability, and autonomy; it is also importantly related to various cognitive capacities or faculties. We have seen, however, that it can be distinguished from these other qualities on account of its involving a certain willingness and ability to transcend a particular cognitive standpoint, and to do so with the aim of “taking up” or “taking seriously” a distinct cognitive standpoint. While the transcending in question is often accompanied by activity characteristic of other virtues or abilities, it is ultimately distinct from this activity. Intellectual empathy, for instance, involves a willingness or ability to view things from the standpoint of another person, to “get inside another’s head.” In certain cases, it may be that a person will be unable to do this if he lacks open-mindedness, since open-mindedness might comprise the breaking free or departure from one’s own cognitive standpoint that is necessary before one can hope to take up the standpoint of the other. But the “breaking free” and the “taking up” are distinct activities or phenomena, the former being proper to open-mindedness and the latter to intellectual empathy. Similarly, creativity, understood either as a character trait or hardwired capacity for conceiving of new possibilities, concepts, approaches, or the like, is often aided by and for its successful operation might even require open-mindedness. But here again the actual conception of the new thought or possibility is the work of creativity, while the antecedent intellectual detaching or abstracting, which amounts to a kind of *preparation* for creative activity, is the work of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness thus occupies its own characteristic niche within the cognitive economy. It is not entirely parasitic on or reducible to other intellectual excellences.

What more can be said, however, about the relationship between open-mindedness and these other, closely allied virtues and abilities? Several of the examples of open-mindedness discussed above, together with certain remarks just made, suggest that open-mindedness plays something of a *facilitating* role vis-à-vis other intellectual excellences—that it allows its possessor to employ or make effective use of these excellences. This is evident, first, in the

immediate motivation of open-mindedness, as specified by (c) and (d) of (OM). An open-minded person, we have seen, is one who transcends a certain standpoint in order to “take up” or “take seriously” a different standpoint. The latter notions implicate some of the virtues and abilities in question. “Taking up” a cognitive standpoint, for instance, can amount to *comprehending* or *conceiving* of it; and taking such a standpoint “seriously” requires giving it a *fair, honest, and objective* hearing. This shows that other intellectual virtues and capacities enter into the specific motivational conditions of open-mindedness (even if open-mindedness itself is not *reducible* to these other qualities).

Two additional points concerning the relation between open-mindedness and these other cognitive excellences are worth making. First, open-mindedness can *initiate* a cognitive process on which these other qualities are subsequently brought to bear. For instance, my open-mindedness might be what initiates or explains my decision to engage in honest dialogue with one of my intellectual opponents. Or it might fundamentally be what allows me to “think outside the box,” to conceive of an explanation of an apparently incoherent set of facts. Second, open-mindedness can *sustain* or *support* other virtues or abilities already in operation. Again, suppose my open-mindedness leads me to enter into a rational, honest dialogue with an intellectual opponent. It might also be essential to keeping the dialogue going, since I may, after a few minutes of discussion, be tempted to terminate the conversation. The continuation or sustaining of honest, fair dialogue sometimes requires keeping an open mind. Alternatively, suppose my curiosity about an issue (rather than my open-mindedness) leads me to assess the relative merits of two competing theories. Upon realizing that the theories, or their logical relationship, are more complex or rigorous than I expected, I may need to exercise open-mindedness if I am to avoid bringing the inquiry to a premature conclusion or drawing a hasty conclusion. In short, the initiation of virtuous or otherwise excellent cognitive activity may require an exercise of open-mindedness; in other cases, open-mindedness may be necessary for sustaining such activity.

Open-mindedness is, then, largely or often a “facilitating virtue.” By freeing the mind, or keeping it free, by allowing the mind to detach or remain detached from a default position or standpoint, it creates “psychological space,” as it were, for other virtues and faculties to perform their respective functions.

4. When To Be Open-Minded?

In this final section, I turn to one of the more pressing questions for any philosophical account of open-mindedness: namely, when (or under what conditions or toward which views, etc.) is it appropriate to manifest or exercise open-mindedness? While an important and challenging question, I can do little more in the space that remains than offer an initial sketch of an answer. But the discussion will, I hope, shed at least some worthwhile light on the relevant structural and practical dimensions of open-mindedness.

My immediate focus will be a slightly (though importantly) narrower version of the question just specified. I shall consider under what circumstances it is *intellectually* (versus, say, morally) virtuous to engage in the kind of cognitive transcending or detaching that I have argued is characteristic of open-mindedness. This question presupposes that an exercise of open-mindedness is not always intellectually virtuous and thus (potentially at least) that open-mindedness itself is not always an intellectual virtue. But this assumption is all to the good, for as indicated at the outset of the paper, there are ways of being open-minded, and ways displaying open-mindedness, that are less than intellectually virtuous—and indeed that might even be intellectually vicious. My aim, then, is to begin to identify what distinguishes an intellectually virtuous exercise or instance of open-mindedness from a non-virtuous one.

It should be no surprise that an answer to this question might be derivable from the overall *goal* or *end* of intellectual virtue. Let us stipulate, for ease of discussion, that this end is truth or true belief.¹⁵ Once we restrict our attention in this way, the following reply to our question presents itself:

(R1) A person S's engaging in the activity characteristic of open-mindedness under circumstances C is intellectually virtuous just in case S's engaging in this activity in C is helpful for reaching the truth.

While initially plausible, (R1) is at once too strong and too weak. As I have argued elsewhere (Baehr 2007 and forthcoming), (R1) is too strong because it would prevent us from regarding as intellectually virtuous the open-minded activity of, say, a suitably deceived (but fully internally rational) subject of a Cartesian demon. And it is too weak because it would deem intellectually virtuous the truth-conducive open-minded activity of a person who has *no reason whatsoever* to think that this activity really *is* truth-conducive—or, even worse, who has reason to think that the activity is likely to lead an increase in *false* beliefs.¹⁶

A related but more promising reply is as follows:

(R2) A person S's engaging in the activity characteristic of open-mindedness under circumstances C is intellectually virtuous just in case it is reasonable for S to believe that engaging in this activity in C may be helpful for reaching the truth.¹⁷

This reply to our question “rules correctly” in connection with both sorts of cases noted above.¹⁸ It also permits us to make sense of many other familiar and commonsense judgments about open-mindedness. Suppose, for instance, that I have extremely good reasons in support of a proposition P and no direct or indirect evidence for not-P, but that some person whom I know to be highly irrational accepts not-P and would like for me to give an open-minded hearing to his favorite arguments against P. It likely would not be intellectually virtuous for me to engage in open-minded inquiry concerning this person's reasons for accepting not-P.¹⁹ And one plausible explanation of this is that it would be unreasonable for me to think that doing so might be epistemically profitable or get me any closer to the truth regarding P. Alternatively, suppose my grounds for P are relatively weak, that I tend to be biased and hasty in my thinking about P (and am aware of this tendency), and that I have a great deal of respect for the intellectual abilities and character of the person asking me to consider the case for not-P. Here I take it that it likely *would* be intellectually virtuous for me to be open-minded. And again one plausible explanation of this is that it is entirely reasonable for me to think that doing so may be helpful for reaching the truth about P.

While I think (R2) is on the right track, considerably more needs to be said in connection with it. It might be worried, for instance, that (R2) is too weak. For again, this principle stipulates that for an exercise of open-mindedness to count as intellectually virtuous, it must be reasonable for the person in question to think (merely) that this exercise *may* be helpful for reaching the truth. Doesn't this threaten to cast the net of open-mindedness too broadly? Wouldn't following this rule lead to excessive exercises of open-mindedness—to a wasteful or otherwise inappropriate allotment of our time and epistemic resources?

This concern is well-placed and indeed warrants a modification of (R2). Before getting to this modification, however, it is important to note that there is at least some motivation for thinking of the standard at issue in relatively weak terms. For suppose that we were to maintain instead that S's engaging in open-minded activity regarding P in C is intellectually virtuous just in case it is reasonable for S to think that engaging in this activity in C is *likely* to be helpful for reaching the truth regarding P. This, I take it, would limit the class of intellectually acceptable or

virtuous exercises of open-mindedness in an objectionable way. For presumably it is sometimes intellectually worthwhile or virtuous to give an open-minded hearing to the case against a particular belief given the mere *chance* that this belief is mistaken and thus that an open-minded inquiry may get one closer to the truth.²⁰

The obvious solution at this point is to treat the condition specified by (R2) as necessary but not sufficient. Suitably modified, (R2) becomes:

(R3) A person S's engaging in the activity characteristic of open-mindedness under circumstances C is intellectually virtuous *only if* it is reasonable for S to believe that engaging in this activity in C may be helpful for reaching the truth.

(R3) is considerably weaker and less ambitious than (R2). I assume, however, that it captures one central and salient condition that must be met in order for an exercise of open-mindedness to count as intellectually virtuous.

One additional issue worth considering concerns what exactly might be involved with its being "reasonable" for a person to think that the activity characteristic of open-mindedness may be truth-conducive in the relevant sense. This issue could be approached from a variety of different angles.²¹ My own approach will be a fairly modest one. I will not attempt to specify anything like necessary and sufficient conditions for the relevant concept of reasonability. Rather, I will speak to the issue of which factors are likely to govern the applicability of this concept.

Imagine, then, a person S in circumstances C who accepts a proposition P but is considering giving an open-minded hearing to an argument or evidence against P. My suggestion is as follows:

Its being "reasonable" for S to think that being open-minded in C may be helpful for reaching the truth is generally a function of the comparative strength of S's grounds concerning: (1) P itself; (2) S's own reliability relative to the propositional domain to which P belongs; and (3) the reliability of the source of the relevant argument or evidence against P.²²

Therefore, as suggested earlier, if S has very strong reasons in support of P, is reliable in his judgments concerning P and related matters (and is aware of this fact), and has reason to doubt the credibility of the source of the alleged counterevidence to P, then presumably it will not be reasonable for S to believe that being open-minded in the present circumstances may be helpful for reaching the truth. But, again, if S's reasons for P are weak, S knows himself to be sloppy or careless or otherwise unreliable in making judgments concerning P and related matters, and has reason to trust the source of the alleged counterevidence to P, then presumably it will be reasonable for S to believe that being open-minded in the present situation may be helpful for reaching the truth.²³

This reply is also limited in some important ways. Again, it does not actually specify when it is reasonable for a person to hold a belief of the relevant sort. Rather, it attempts merely to identify the factors relevant to making such a determination.²⁴ Nonetheless, the formulation still sheds some light on when it is reasonable for a person to think that the activity characteristic of open-mindedness may be helpful for reaching the truth, and thus, when conjoined with (R3), on when it is intellectually virtuous to engage in such activity.²⁵

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¹ Of intellectual *character* virtues, that is. See, for instance, Zagzebski (1996), Montmarquet (1993), Kvanvig (1992), and Roberts and Wood (2007). See Riggs (2010) for a discussion of *why* open-mindedness is regarded as an intellectual virtue *par excellence*.

² It should be clear, however, how the trait I profile here would be an intellectual virtue if accompanied and motivated by the general virtue-making properties articulated in Baehr (forthcoming: Ch. 6).

³ This tends to be the focus of William Hare's (1979; 1985) excellent treatments of open-mindedness. However, as I explain below, Hare (rightly) allows that open-mindedness can also be manifested outside this context.

⁴ See Hare (1985: 94) and (1979: 9 and 24) for a development of the point that an open-minded person can be "neutral" or "undecided" about the views toward which he is being open-minded.

⁵ Of course it also bears the marks of at least one other intellectual virtue, namely, fair-mindedness. This raises the question of how to understand the relationship between open-mindedness and related virtues like fair-mindedness, intellectual honesty, and intellectual impartiality. My view of this matter will be clarified in the course of the paper, and I will take it up directly in section 3.

⁶ Another worry is that the model is apparently defining open-mindedness in terms of *other* intellectual virtues, which (among other things) raises the question of whether open-mindedness is in fact a distinct virtue. See Section 3 below for a discussion of the relation between open-mindedness and other virtues.

⁷ The students will, of course, need to stretch their minds in order to grasp this information (this is why they might benefit from being open-minded). The difference between them and the detective is that that detective is also being called upon to *originate* or *creatively conceive* of a certain possibility or explanation. And the suggestion is that this sort of intellectual activity

might also be facilitated by an exercise of open-mindedness. This might appear to blur (or call into question the very existence of) the line between open-mindedness and related virtues like creativity and originality. I address this issue in section 3 below, making clear that there is a definite distinction between open-mindedness and these other traits.

⁸ For an interesting discussion of the place of open-mindedness in scientific inquiry, see Hare (1985: Ch. 7).

⁹ Isaacson (2007: 549). The context of this remark was a discussion with poet Saint-John Perse in which Einstein queried: “How does the idea of a poem come?” In response, Perse emphasized the role of intuition and imagination, to which Einstein replied with delight: “It’s the same for a man of science.”

¹⁰ Cf. Hare (1979) and (1985).

¹¹ A different, but not unrelated, definition of open-mindedness is defended by Hare in (1979) and (1985). He describes open-mindedness as “a willingness to form and revise one’s own views as impartially and as objectively as possible in the light of available evidence and argument” (1985: 3). While there is much to be said in support of this definition (and considerable convergence between it and the definition just stated), I think it fails to identify the primary characteristic element of open-mindedness: namely, the “cognitive transcending” or detaching described above. In fact, as Wayne Riggs (2010) has suggested, Hare’s account seems to equate open-mindedness with rationality *simpliciter* or with the entire “package” of intellectual virtues (or at least some substantial subset of them).

¹² Hare (1979: 8) makes a similar point.

¹³ See Foot (2002: 9-14) for a related discussion.

¹⁴ Wayne Riggs (2010) identifies two other qualities as partly “constitutive” of open-mindedness: namely, “self-knowledge” and “self-monitoring.” While I will not stop to develop the point here, my own view is that these are better understood as *preconditions* for the possession of the actual intellectual *virtue* of open-mindedness. In other words: (1) Open-mindedness is not itself a matter of knowing oneself or monitoring one’s beliefs (though to be open-minded in the right way, one’s open-mindedness must operate against the “backdrop,” so to speak, of the kind of self-awareness these things bring about); and (2) A person can be “open-minded” in a relevant (even if less than fully virtuous) sense even if she lacks much self-knowledge or doesn’t engage in much cognitive monitoring (recall the open-minded college student described at the outset of the paper).

¹⁵ For a related truth-oriented account of open-mindedness, see Adler (2004: 130 and 139).

¹⁶ Hare (1985) also rejects something like this “reliability” requirement on open-mindedness (87). In place of it he alludes to something along the lines of my (R2) below (87-88).

¹⁷ This formulation could easily be extended to cover other normative dimensions of open-mindedness. We might say, for instance, that it would be intellectually virtuous for S to manifest a certain *amount* of open-minded activity or to show open-mindedness toward a particular *idea* or *person* just in case it is reasonable for S to think that doing so may be epistemically profitable.

¹⁸ Specifically, it “rules in” the victim of the Cartesian demon, since it is entirely reasonable for this person to believe that his open-minded activity may be helpful for reaching the truth; and it “rules out,” for an even more obvious reason, the person who lacks any reason at all for thinking the same.

¹⁹ Recall that we are concerned strictly with what would be *intellectually* virtuous. Depending on the person, my relationship to him, and so forth, it might very well be *morally* virtuous (even virtuous all-things-considered) for me to give an open-minded hearing to the case against P.

²⁰ In certain cases, this is likely to be due to certain *pragmatic* stakes (as with belief in God, say). But the stakes might also be *epistemic*. Suppose that some things are epistemically more worth knowing or having true beliefs about than others. Relative to a particular belief about one of these epistemically “significant” or “worthy” subject matters, an open-minded consideration of a counterargument might be warranted given the mere *possibility* that it is mistaken. Here what hangs in the balance is a straightforwardly epistemic good.

²¹ We might seek to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for this notion. Or we might ask about the required strength of a “reasonable” person’s grounds or evidence. Or about whether “reasonability” should be understood in fully “internal” (or partially “external”) terms.

²² Three brief remarks are in order. First, it might be thought that (2) and (3) would collapse into (1), that is, that if I have reason to think that a reliable source denies P, this bears on my evidence for “P itself.” While this may be right, I am thinking of (1) in terms of evidence or reasons that bear in a more direct or immediate way on P. I assume this idea is sufficiently intuitive. Second, this formulation applies only to the context of intellectual conflict or dispute; thus it does not say anything about what “reasonability” might amount to in some of the other contexts to which open-mindedness is relevant (for example, that of trying to *comprehend* a foreign subject matter or to *conceive* of an explanation for some perplexing data). Third, even relative to the context of intellectual disagreement, the account is only “generally” correct because, in certain cases at least, there may be evidential considerations that bear upon what is “reasonable” but that do not fit into any of the three categories just delineated.

²³ Riggs’s (2010) discussion of the role of self-knowledge and self-monitoring, discussed briefly in note 14 above, is clearly relevant to an assessment of (2) above. To exercise open-mindedness appropriately or virtuously, one must have a good sense of one’s own reliability with respect to the subject matter at issue. The kind of self-knowledge and self-monitoring that Riggs describes is critical for bringing this about. Also relevant here are the discussions of Riggs (2010) and Adler (2004) concerning the importance to open-mindedness of a second-order awareness of one’s own cognitive *fallibility*.

²⁴ To convert the formulation into an account of when it is reasonable for a person to hold the relevant belief, we would (at a minimum) need a way of assigning relative weights to the various parameters identified in (1)-(3).

²⁵ This paper has benefitted from numerous conversations with friends and colleagues over the past few years and from audiences at the 2007 Southern California Philosophy Conference and the Society of Christian Philosophers group meeting at the 2007 American Catholic Philosophical Association in Milwaukee. I am also grateful to the editor and two anonymous referees for the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* for very helpful feedback. Finally, special thanks are due to Michael Pace and Dan Speak for especially helpful and lengthy conversations on the topic.