

The moral virtue of open-mindedness

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a new and richer account of open-mindedness as a moral virtue. I argue that the main problem with existing accounts is that they derive the moral value of open-mindedness entirely from the *epistemic* role it plays in moral thought. This view is overly intellectualist. I argue that open-mindedness as a moral virtue promotes our flourishing alongside others in ways that are quite independent of its role in correcting our beliefs. I close my discussion by distinguishing open-mindedness from what some might consider its equivalent: empathy and tolerance.

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1. Introduction

Given that open-mindedness is widely hailed as an important intellectual virtue, one may wonder whether it can also contribute to our moral life.¹ Indeed, charges of narrow- or closed-mindedness as if it were a moral defect are not uncommon. When we regard as ‘closed-minded’ the parents who refuse to accept their child’s decision to stay single or the person who constantly criticizes her new immigrant neighbors, we seem to target a flaw that is more than *intellectual*.

This paper is an attempt to make sense of open-mindedness as a moral virtue. I begin by considering two accounts that aim to do just that. The main problem with these accounts is that they derive the moral value of open-mindedness entirely from the *epistemic* role it plays in moral thought. This view is overly intellectualist. The key to understanding the trait as a moral virtue is to recognize that it is not merely an attitude toward what we believe, but one that underlies meaningful engagement with all sorts of objects we may experience, including persons. I argue that the moral virtue of open-mindedness promotes

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our flourishing alongside others in ways that are quite independent of its role in correcting our beliefs. I close my discussion by distinguishing open-mindedness from what some might consider its equivalent: empathy and tolerance.

2. Intellectualist accounts of open-mindedness as a moral virtue

William Hare, the long-standing advocate for open-mindedness in education, argues that open-mindedness is crucial for moral education because ‘people need to be able to make up their own minds about moral issues based on a consideration of evidence and argument, and should be prepared to revise their thinking if confronted with relevant objections and difficulties’ (1987, 99). For Hare, the moral agent is tasked with finding the right answers to, or at least coming to sound judgments about, questions of morality. A person *qua* moral agent is as interested in truth as she is *qua* intellectual agent, only that the truth she is interested in concerns *moral* right and wrong. Thus, whatever significance open-mindedness has in intellectual inquiry can easily be carried over to the moral realm.

Straightforward as it is, Hare’s account suffers from the obvious problem that the moral agent is not just an inquirer, but a *doer* most of all. The moral task is not so much theorizing about trolley problems or debating the permissibility of abortion as deciding whether to donate to the cancer foundation when the cashier asks upon checkout. The most brilliant ethicist, exhibiting various intellectual virtues in her quest for moral truth, may not also be a moral exemplar.

The problem has an easy remedy. To say that moral agency involves choice and action is not to deny the place of reflective, critical thought. Rather, we only need to see that a good moral agent’s choice and action must be informed by reflective, critical thought to see how open-mindedness is indeed a trait that a moral agent should have. This is just what Arpaly (2011) suggests in her paper, ‘Open-mindedness as a Moral Virtue.’ Since the moral agent is concerned with right action, which requires knowledge of certain relevant facts, the moral agent must therefore also be disposed to revise her beliefs in light of new evidence so as to ensure adequate knowledge (for right action). Open-mindedness understood as the disposition to be appropriately responsive to new evidence is thus instrumentally valuable for moral agency. By contrast, one who has a vested interest in her belief’s being true is likely to close her mind off to such evidence. In Arpaly’s example of Ignaz Semmelweis and his fellow doctors of the nineteenth-century Vienna General Hospital, the colleagues dismissed Semmelweis’ suggestion that they wash their hands before treating patients (to reduce the mortality rate of puerperal fever) even though it was based on empirical evidence. Agreeing with Semmelweis would be tantamount to admitting that they, the doctors themselves, had been responsible for the deaths of many patients. Had these doctors been motivated by *moral* concerns rather than a concern

for their own reputation, they would have been open-minded and welcomed a challenge, such as Semmelweis's, to their established belief (2011, 81–82).

I do not wish to dispute the crucial epistemic role open-mindedness plays in moral agency. Indeed, open-mindedness does not only contribute to an individual's moral agency, but to collective agency too — moral progress in a society is made possible by pioneers who are able to question received opinions and urge the public to open their minds too. However, I find Arpaly's account wanting for two reasons. First, her characterization of the epistemic role of open-mindedness in moral deliberation is at once too wide and too narrow. Second and more importantly, her account rests on the mistaken assumption that open-mindedness is nothing but an epistemic disposition. Since, as I will argue, what makes open-mindedness a moral virtue goes beyond its epistemic function, Arpaly's account fails to correctly explain *how* open-mindedness can be morally virtuous.

An immediate problem with Arpaly's account is that it relies on too broad an understanding of the nature of open-mindedness. On Arpaly's construal, 'an open-minded person is disposed to gain, lose, and revise beliefs in a particular, reasonable way' (2011, 75). Elsewhere in the article, she claims that 'The sort of situation in which the virtue of open-mindedness becomes relevant is the situation in which we meet counter-evidence to our beliefs' (80). What this disposition picks out is not the particular intellectual virtue of open-mindedness, but the general trait of a person who cares deeply about forming justified, true beliefs and hence someone who is all around epistemically responsible or virtuous.² Although Arpaly is right that it is morally virtuous to pursue truth or knowledge out of moral concerns, she has not said much about how open-mindedness is a *distinct* moral virtue.

While Arpaly's conception of open-mindedness is too broad, her view of how open-mindedness can contribute to moral action is too narrow. On her view, the search for truth (or at least justified beliefs) spurred by moral concern is limited to the task of ascertaining relevant facts bearing on one's decision; the morally closed-minded fail to act in the right way because, due to insufficient moral concern, they fail to adjust their beliefs in light of new evidence. Semmelweis' colleagues are such an example. But getting one's facts right does not guarantee right action. What the moral agent needs to know — and can thus be wrong about — includes not only facts about the situation she faces, but also relevant moral principles or ideals, or what can ultimately be called a conception of 'the good.' On this broader view of moral knowledge, an employer may make a morally objectionable hiring decision not because she holds a dogmatic view about the applicant's credentials, but because she is reluctant to question her deep-seated racism. Furthermore, the connection between moral concern and truth is not all that straightforward. Relevant epistemic requirements or goals arising from one's moral concerns may vary in different circumstances. As Preston-Roedder (2013) argues in 'Faith in Humanity', it can be morally admirable

to believe in people's decency despite a lack of evidence or even in the face of contrary evidence. Yet, such faith seems like open-mindedness at work.

These problems are relatively easy to fix, since all we need is a more refined conception of open-mindedness that can ground a more nuanced account of its place in moral agency. But before I turn to such an alternative conception, let me highlight what I take to be the most serious problem with Arpaly's account: it fails to do justice to the full meaning of open-mindedness by assuming it is entirely an epistemic disposition. Such an *intellectualist* approach to understanding open-mindedness as a moral virtue is inadequate, as the following two examples show.

First, consider the story of Davis (1998), an African-American musician whose dialogs with members of the Ku Klux Klan culminated in genuine friendships and possibly the decisions of some members to leave the Klan. It seems to me that Davis exemplifies the *moral* virtue of open-mindedness, and he does so not merely because his open-mindedness yields new knowledge about what sort of people the Klan members are, what makes them racist, or whatever else he has learned in his interactions with them.³ He could have easily dismissed the idea of initiating conversation when he had the chance to, for he already knew the Klan's position on race, and that it is wrong (not to say that its views are a personal attack on him). It is against this background that his willingness to engage with the Klan members and their points of view stands out as particularly admirable.

It is not that an intellectualist account cannot explain why we find Davis admirable — on Arpaly's view, what he did was virtuous because he acted out of moral concern. Rather, the problem is that the explanation given by such an account misses the point, for it is bound to construe Davis' open-mindedness in terms of belief formation and revision when in fact, it is not so much about his (or anyone else's) *beliefs* as it is about, perhaps, his attitude toward the individuals he talked to. True, Davis learned a great deal about what the Klan members thought and why they thought so, but whatever adjustment he made in his belief system as a result is not quite what we would commend him for (unlike in the case of Semmelweis). It is also doubtful that his new knowledge led him to better moral decisions than otherwise: it is not as if he would otherwise mistreat Klan members or fail to fight racism. I suppose one might point to the positive outcomes such as the resignation of several Klan leaders and perhaps the hope he inspires in us of the possibility of communication and even friendship between unlikely parties, and argue that such consequences nevertheless result from changes in *beliefs* — those Klansmen came to *know* better, and we as readers also *know* better because of Davis's actions. But even if there is indeed new knowledge in both cases, and even if that is in turn attributable to Davis, these effects only go to show the power of Davis's open-mindedness, which cannot be reduced to an epistemic achievement. These considerations suggest

that there is indeed something good about open-mindedness over and above its epistemic contribution to moral ends.

Or consider a less dramatic example. A young man decides to come out to his father. He foresees it will be a very difficult conversation, knowing his father's conservative views. Yet, he wants to give it a try because his father has always been willing to give him a hearing. As it turns out, his father is outraged upon the son's disclosure, but nevertheless manages to contain his anger as he sits through the son's attempt at debunking popular myths about homosexuality. Though the father remains unconvinced, he listens carefully and asks questions often, keeping to their agreement that both will try to be rational and hear each other out as much as they can. At the end of the long conversation, they reach an impasse.

Once again, an intellectualist account cannot adequately capture what the father's open-mindedness consisted in. On Arpaly's view, the father's actions are indeed morally virtuous because they are expressions of his moral concern, i.e. concern for the son's well-being, but what exactly did he do? According to the intellectualist account, he put himself in a position to face whatever challenges his son might raise to his beliefs about homosexuality so that he could give a well-informed response appropriate to the facts of his son's situation. The account can also grant that he did a good thing despite not having his mind changed in the end. I agree with all this, but I think there is more to the story. What the father was doing, through his open-minded engagement in the conversation, was not merely a search for the truth (or other epistemic goods such as understanding). By 'giving his son a hearing', with whole-hearted seriousness, he was already standing by his side though they were not yet on the same side on the issue of the son's sexuality. The fact that he has always been willing to 'give his son a hearing' suggests that there is something more going on in that commitment than a commitment to having true beliefs (for right action). He is also committed to being available for the son rather than detached, and to being respectful to him (and not just to his opinions) rather than dismissive. This commitment is also confirmed by the son's decision to open up to him in the first place. My claim, which I will elaborate on and defend in the next two sections, is that this commitment is also part of what it means for the father to be open-minded toward his son.

3. A more open-minded view of open-mindedness

So far, I have argued that Arpaly's account of the moral virtue of open-mindedness needs (1) a more precise definition of open-mindedness as an epistemic disposition, and (2) a more expansive understanding of open-mindedness that goes beyond its epistemic function. While I am more interested in exploring (2), I will present my solution by way of considering (1) first.

3.1. *Open-mindedness as an epistemic disposition*

A starting point for rethinking the nature of open-mindedness, when construed as an epistemic disposition, is to realize that it is not only a disposition to be critical, but one to be creative and flexible too.⁴ Hare's and Arpaly's characterizations of open-mindedness focus on the need to correct or improve our beliefs, but sometimes what we need to act well is to come up with imaginative solutions to a problem or to understand something so unfamiliar to us that we have no pre-existing beliefs regarding it.

Open-mindedness differs from other intellectual virtues in this important respect: it involves a shift in one's cognitive contact with the world from a familiar position to one that is different, unfamiliar, or unusual. Jason Baehr's definition nicely captures this kind of shift in view. He defines open-mindedness as being willing and able to 'transcend a default cognitive standpoint in order to take up or take seriously the merits of a distinct cognitive standpoint' (2011, 152). On Baehr's view, open-mindedness can manifest not just in cases where one reconsiders her belief in light of countervailing arguments, but also in cases where one assesses competing positions without having formed any prior belief herself, such as when a judge hears a case; or attempts to grasp a radically different way of looking at the world, such as when students learn Einstein's General Theory; or comes up with new ideas or possibilities, such as when a detective imagines possible explanations for a crime (149).

Baehr's conception of open-mindedness avoids some of the problems we find with Arpaly's. It is specific enough that open-mindedness can be distinguished from epistemic rationality. It also allows open-mindedness to play a greater role in moral thought by expanding the range of possible objects about which one can be open-minded in moral deliberation to include only beliefs about relevant facts, but also background beliefs, habits or ways of thinking, and hierarchies of values. Furthermore, this conception does not tie the value of open-mindedness to truth or justified belief. Exposure to an alternative point of view could correct one's beliefs, but it need not. An implication of this is that it leaves room for cases where good moral response is not grounded in truth or justified beliefs, as in the case of Preston-Roedder's (2013) examples of faith in humanity. We may say that this faith is open-minded, for the *default* point of view would recommend a much harsher judgment of those individuals, given the available evidence and prevailing attitudes of others.⁵ Instead, the protagonists in these examples chose to take an epistemic risk, a decision that Preston-Roedder rightly observes to be morally admirable.

Baehr's definition points to the possibility that one can open one's mind to a great deal more than Hare and Arpaly assume. If we construe open-mindedness in terms of distancing the self from one's default point of view, it is not hard to see that morality is a constant exercise of opening one's mind. It is commonly assumed that our default point of view is one of self-interestedness, which

privileges interests of the self over those of others.⁶ The various proposals for 'the moral point of view' are proposals of a viewpoint supposed to counteract the tendencies of the self-interested viewpoint. Our default viewpoint also tends to be self-centered. It is a viewpoint that Russell (2001) calls 'self-assertion,' and Frye (1983) calls the 'arrogant eye.' Although writing for different purposes, both target what is essentially the same flaw in us, that we tend to assimilate what we encounter to ourselves, impose our own frame of reference on it, and refuse to see it for what it is. This becomes a *moral* flaw when the object in question is another person, for it is through distorting the object that the self-centered viewpoint is able to devalue and dismiss it. The corrective suggested by Frye is the 'loving eye,' which respects the independence of its object and aspires to see it for what it actually is, free from the preferences and prejudices of the self (at least as much as possible).⁷ It takes open-mindedness to give up the 'arrogant eye' for the 'loving eye.'

Furthermore, taking the moral point of view often requires being aware — and wary — of the point of view we have been accustomed to as a result of day-to-day life. The head of a pharmaceutical company driven to maximize profits, the researcher gripped by the pressure to publish, or the average employee intent on following the company's rules risks falling into moral indifference. As Hannah Arendt observes, 'sheer thoughtlessness' (1963, 287) — that is, a total lack of critical self-reflection — can lead an otherwise conscientious person down the path of evil, as in the case of Adolf Eichmann.

So far, by focusing on one key aspect of open-mindedness in Baehr's account — detachment from one's default standpoint — we arrive at a fuller picture of the relation between open-mindedness and moral thought: it does not merely aid in moral thought, but is often what enables us to enter into moral thought in the first place. But there is still more to the picture. As I suggested in the previous section, open-mindedness plays more than an epistemic role in moral agency (which is to say that it is not just related to moral *thought*). To see how, we need to look more closely at the other aspect of the disposition: an openness to alternative viewpoints. We can begin by questioning whether the range of possible objects for open-mindedness can be further expanded. Recall that when we move away from Hare's and Arpaly's view to Baehr's, we have at the same time accepted that we can be open-minded not just about what we believe, but about what we think and how we think, where thinking ranges over a variety of cognitive activities and states. But does open-mindedness have to be restricted to *thinking*?

3.2. Beyond open-mindedness as an epistemic disposition

I suppose we can be open-minded about music.⁸ And when we say we are open-minded about music, we don't just mean that we are open to changing our *beliefs* or *judgments* about certain kinds of music. Rather, we mean something

stronger: we are open to different kinds of *music*. This in turn means something like we are open to *sampling* different kinds of music, that is, we are willing to *listen to* and perhaps *enjoy* different kinds of music.⁹ Clearly, listening to music is not the same thing as thinking (though it may involve thinking). But one may object that this sort of ‘sampling’ cannot be necessary to open-mindedness across different objects, for surely, one can be open-minded about lifestyle choices without being willing to ‘sample’ some of them herself. Perhaps this is true, but even so, it still seems right to me that open-mindedness must at least entail a willingness to be *engaged* in some way with the object. By this I mean taking an interest in, or paying attention to, the object instead of being indifferent, and exploring ways in which one may relate to it.¹⁰ In the case of music, ‘engagement’ would typically take the form of listening, whereas in the case of lifestyle choices, ‘engagement’ could occur through trying out a lifestyle, or associating with people who live that lifestyle, or reading about it, etc.¹¹

Thus, even Baehr’s definition needs to be expanded if we are to arrive at a notion of open-mindedness that can accommodate a wide range of examples; the ‘standpoint’ or ‘perspective’ we transcend and the one we take up or take seriously in opening our minds need not be purely *cognitive*, for an open-minded person is prepared to engage with the world not only cognitively, but in other modes of experience as well.¹² The open-minded music lover is not just able and willing to suspend or even change her preferences or opinions about music, but her habit of listening and her way of responding to music as well. Similarly, someone who is open-minded about lifestyles is not just unafraid to change her beliefs about different lifestyles, but her affective and motivational structure as well (among other things). She may be, for example, open to *feeling* less attached to material goods — and not just *thinking* they are not as important as she used to think — or to being less *inclined* to avert her eyes upon seeing someone dressed in religious garb.

This is why I think open-mindedness can be thought of as a ‘general-purpose,’ rather than purely epistemic, disposition. It can be exercised in different domains with respect to different sorts of things, with the employment of different faculties.¹³ When the object of open-mindedness is a belief, an understanding, or a way of thinking, what we have is *epistemic* open-mindedness, the proper subject of Baehr’s account. When the object is music, food, sexuality, a person, a lifestyle, a hobby, and so on, what is at work is primarily one or another cousin of epistemic open-mindedness: musical (or aesthetic) open-mindedness, gastronomic open-mindedness, interpersonal open-mindedness, and so on. Although what it takes to be open-minded about different kinds of objects can be quite different, what we have here are still instances of open-mindedness because all of them share the core feature of detaching from or transcending a default standpoint from which one experiences some object in order to take up an alternative one, from which she would engage with the object differently. One might nevertheless wonder whether the non-epistemic instances of open-mindedness are entailed

by epistemic open-mindedness, and so whether we should all be intellectualists about this trait after all. For being open-minded about music just means being open-minded about one's *beliefs* concerning the value of certain types of music, which in turn would clearly entail the sorts of motivational, affective, and behavioral change I described earlier: being willing to listen to and enjoy different kinds of music. Although such changes may well occur as a result of an exercise of epistemic open-mindedness, I believe that they are fundamentally different from an exercise of musical open-mindedness. The main reason has to do with a difference in the objects of open-mindedness in the two cases. The person who is concerned about her music-related beliefs is concerned about the truth and perhaps also her relation to the truth. Her actions of listening to the kinds of music in question are merely a means to the epistemic end of ascertaining her beliefs. If there are more reliable ways of achieving her end, for example, by critically evaluating expert opinions on the kinds of music in question, then her own direct experience with such music would be unnecessary. In contrast, such experience is essential, not incidental, to her exercise of musical open-mindedness.

The broader view of open-mindedness I have proposed forms a more adequate basis for an account of the *moral* virtue of open-mindedness. Assuming that morality deals with our relations or interactions with other people, open-mindedness becomes *morally* significant especially when its object is another person, including her experience, lifestyle, culture, values, interests, and so on.¹⁴ To open one's mind to another person is not just to be exposed to new *beliefs* about her and her experience, lifestyle, and so on, or even to a new *cognitive* standpoint involved in understanding or thinking about them. The cognitive change may well occur, but it is only a *by-product* of the change in one's overall orientation, from one of facing away to that of facing toward. What is morally significant here is not only the moral relevance of the newly acquired beliefs or cognitive standpoint, but that change in orientation itself. The fundamental difference between an open-minded person and a closed-minded person lies in precisely the fact that the former is willing and able to change her orientation with respect to some object — in this case, to another person — whereas the latter is not. Daryl Davis could have chosen to remain 'turned away' from the Klansmen, just as the father could have turned down his son's invitation to a conversation, but both were instead able to overcome the resistance to talk face to face with their respective interlocutors. In doing so, they both chose to engage with those *individuals* — and not just with their *beliefs* or *cognitive standpoints*. This choice, made from their open-mindedness, is what I (and I believe many of us) find particularly admirable about them.

4. The moral virtue of open-mindedness

Before I explain how open-mindedness is a moral virtue, three points are in order. First, since I have distinguished between forms of open-mindedness associated

with different domains, my discussion of the moral virtue of open-mindedness is centered specifically on open-mindedness of the interpersonal kind, i.e. open-mindedness directed at persons. Second, my claim is that (interpersonal) open-mindedness exercised judiciously, rather than *any* exercise of open-mindedness, is morally virtuous. It is hardly virtuous to abandon all principles and commitments in a single-minded pursuit of open-mindedness.¹⁵ Nor is it virtuous to refuse to make any judgment at all, especially regarding cases of wrongdoing, and thereby fail to act to promote justice when one should.¹⁶ I will return to these problematic uses of open-mindedness in Section 4.2, where I show that the trait need not leave one blind to moral distinctions. The virtuous person is mindful of the appropriate degree of open-mindedness as well as appropriate ways to express it in a particular situation.

Third, given my characterization, open-mindedness can function not only as an intellectual virtue and moral virtue, but also as a personal virtue and civic virtue. It can function as a personal virtue insofar as we think that a willingness to transcend one's own little world by engaging with the world at large aids in one's personal development.¹⁷ It can function as a civic virtue in part because one needs to be well informed to participate in public discourse and contribute to policy-making.¹⁸ It is also important for living peacefully with members of different cultures in a heterogeneous society. I will discuss the civic virtue of open-mindedness in Section 5, but for now, my discussion will be restricted to open-mindedness *qua* moral virtue.

4.1. Open-mindedness as a moral virtue

What makes open-mindedness a moral virtue?¹⁹ I argue that it is the fact that it expresses moral concern while also promoting important moral goods.

First, open-mindedness expresses a particularly deep kind of recognition respect.²⁰ It expresses recognition respect because in expressing a genuine interest in another person despite oneself, the open-minded person is effectively acknowledging that the other matters to her, regardless of what she judges of him. Moreover, from the examples of Davis and the father, we can see that they show a particularly deep kind of recognition respect because both are willing to *recognize* their respective interlocutors in the sense of turning themselves around to face toward the Klansmen or the son, rather than merely *respecting* them in the sense of constraining their actions by the fact that they are persons (the latter being what I take Stephen Darwall [1977] to mean by 'recognition respect'). It is not that those of us who do not go out of our way to get to know the Klansmen thereby fail to have recognition respect for them, for we can still consider them to be of fundamentally equal worth to us as persons and thus deserve our consideration in our moral deliberation, which is all that is required for recognition respect according to Darwall. Similarly, the father would not fail to have recognition respect for his son if he refused to hear him out, so long as

he nevertheless refrains from interfering with the son's personal life. In contrast, we can say that what the father *actually* did and what Davis did was giving full recognition to their respective interlocutors as they moved from a default standpoint that favors dissociation to one that makes room for those individuals.

The second part of my claim is that open-mindedness as a moral virtue directly contributes to the attainment of moral goods. This is a different point from Arpaly's when she considers the role of *epistemic* open-mindedness in moral agency. As we saw, an (epistemically) open-minded person is more likely to examine her beliefs and act with appropriate responsiveness to countervailing evidence, thus in turn more likely to act in ways that are just or benevolent. Open-mindedness of the interpersonal kind may still have this effect, since being open to another person may result in critical evaluation of one's own beliefs, but over and above that, it also promotes three important kinds of moral goods.

To begin with, the activities, projects, concerns, or ways of life we discover when we open our minds to others may themselves be morally valuable. No doubt we may find some of them objectionable or even appalling, but we may also learn something new about values we do share, come to appreciate a practice that seemed alien to us before, or even be introduced to a new value. Often, it is through traveling that we gain new insights into our lives. But as Lugones (1987) points out, we can learn a great deal through traveling to another person's world — i.e. taking up her point of view — with an open, adventurous, and humble attitude.

Furthermore, open-mindedness opens up possibilities of forming or reviving a genuine relationship. The example of the gay son and his father demonstrates how the father's willingness to hear the son out helps preserve and even strengthen the bond between them. In the case of Daryl Davis, it is just as striking to see friendship develop between Davis and some of the Klansmen he talked to, over their common interest in music, among other things. This is certainly a peculiar kind of friendship, for the Klansmen held racist beliefs and attitudes, and belonged to an organization that blatantly discriminated against Davis's racial group even if they did not hate Davis personally. Yet, as Davis himself wrote, he was intent on seeking common ground in his conversations with the Klansmen, despite the drastic differences he had known and continued to discover. A meaningful relationship, forged or nurtured through the will to reach out to the other and make connections, is itself morally valuable, apart from any other goods that may arise out of it.

I want to make clear that not any kind of *continuation* of relationship is morally good, for a relationship may be maintained in many ways, not all of which are good.²¹ Rather, it is the fact that the father-son relationship in our example is grounded in mutual respect and recognition that its continuation is a moral good. We find something very similar in the case of Daryl Davis. Aside from the positive consequences that may in part be attributed to his dialogs with the Klansmen, what stands out as especially morally admirable or even inspiring

about this case is Davis' decision — and sustained effort — to engage with Klansmen in the face of profound differences and to show respect for them as individuals in the face of an ideology that denies the same respect for him.

This brings us to the third kind of moral goods that open-mindedness promotes. Even in the absence of any personal relationship, there is moral value in being able to live with all the differences in others, not grudgingly, but with a healthy interest in them. Open-mindedness is an antidote to our tendency of 'Othering.' Just as our fallibility is an inherent limitation for which epistemic open-mindedness acts as a powerful remedy (though not a cure), our proneness to focusing on the self is an inherent limitation for which a kind of 'enlarged mind' is supposed to be a remedy. This 'enlarged mind' cannot simply take the form of an abstract, impartial 'moral point of view,' for it remains possible for one to exclude certain 'others' from warranting consideration from this point of view. Instead, it is a mind that remains open to the differences it faces in any individual one might encounter. This does not mean that the open-minded person takes an interest in another merely *as a bearer of differences*, an exotic creature. In fact, it is contrary to the spirit of open-mindedness to regard its object with fixed attributes — such as 'different' or 'exotic.' For the same reason, the open-minded person is cautious about passing evaluative judgments on the object. But her exercise of open-mindedness to another person need not be hinged on the hope that she *will* find something good in the latter, as she is to stand ready for challenges to her assumptions.

4.2. Objections and replies

Two sorts of objections are commonly raised against open-mindedness. While it certainly helps guard against dogmatism and prejudice, it can also lead us astray by promoting a kind of moral promiscuity — indiscriminate acceptance of beliefs, actions, principles, or lifestyles.²² Since not all of these are morally acceptable, open-mindedness cannot be a moral virtue. According to the other objection, open-mindedness threatens to undermine our attachment to our own values and principles since it forces us to constantly question them. Insofar as integrity, understood as a matter of being anchored in one's values and principles, is a central quality of a morally virtuous person, open-mindedness cannot be a moral virtue.

I agree that both moral promiscuity and a lack of integrity are real dangers we face as we push against dogmatism and prejudice. I also want to acknowledge that open-mindedness does indeed involve suspension of judgment, a fact that is taken to underlie both objections. However, the objections trade on an ambiguity in what it means for open-mindedness to involve suspension of judgment. In detaching from a default experience or point of view so as to take up or take seriously an alternative one, suspension of judgment is indeed necessary. But open-minded engagement of the alternative need not preclude

a further process of evaluation. Just as one can *both* be open-minded about different kinds of music *and* make judgments about them after listening with an 'open ear', it is entirely possible to do the same with respect to values and principles. Furthermore, to have the virtue of open-mindedness, one must be able to balance her goals and resources (such as time and energy) against the requirements of open-mindedness. The intellectually virtuous person would not examine every single belief equally relentlessly. Similarly, the morally virtuous person need not shy away from denouncing an act of wrongdoing.

Also, just as the open-minded music lover need not give up all her preferences, the morally open-minded person need not abandon her values and principles whenever she encounters new ones. As William Hare reminds us, a scientist can maintain her confidence in her theory while being fully prepared to revise it if a serious challenge ever arises (1985, 34). Similarly, in the case of the moral virtue of open-mindedness, we can say that one is not putting her deepest commitments on the line just because she is open-minded about them. It simply means she is aware of the possibility that her present standpoint is far from perfect, and therefore welcomes opportunities to improve it. This in no way implies she is any less steadfast about her values than others.

It is also possible for one to modify her values and even her deepest commitments as a result of serious reconsideration, but this need not be a bad thing. Nor is it incompatible with having integrity. In fact, such changes of mind — even drastic changes — are to be expected if we value moral development. Further, I would argue that integrity cannot be a moral virtue without open-mindedness. While it is opposed to a lack of core values or a lack of firm commitment to those values, it is also opposed to an unreflective, stubborn attachment to one's values. For one to have integrity, she must *choose* to endorse certain values and commit herself to them; she is *responsible* for her choice and for standing by it. Given the gravity of this choice, it is especially crucial that she choose well. But one cannot be said to be truly serious about her choice unless she takes an open-minded attitude toward it.²³

5. Open-mindedness and other virtues

I will now turn to a couple of virtues or traits that lie in the neighborhood of open-mindedness. My objective is to distinguish them from open-mindedness, while also clarifying their relation with open-mindedness.

5.1. Open-mindedness and empathy

It might seem that open-mindedness is similar to empathy. When we think of parents who are open-minded about their child's life choices, we think of them as being able to see things from their child's point of view — their open-mindedness consists in their empathy with the child. We can also think of my two

examples of open-mindedness in a similar way: What Daryl Davis tries to do in his conversations with the Klansmen is to understand their point of view, as does the father of the gay son.²⁴

However, it is possible to be open-minded about something without empathizing. This is certainly true when the object of open-mindedness is not a person (or lacks inner experience). A Christian may keep an open mind about her faith as she tries to understand it and other religions. A tourist in a foreign country may be curious about the local culture and turns every moment of defied expectation into a learning experience. In both cases, we see someone transcend her own point of view without entering another person's internal experience. Even when the object of open-mindedness is a person, it is still possible to be open-minded without empathy. The parents of an autistic child may struggle to understand what it feels to be like her, but may nevertheless find other ways to make sense of and even appreciate her experience.

The point is that empathy is a particular approach to engaging with alternative viewpoints, whereas open-mindedness does not require that one engage with alternative viewpoints this way or that, but only that one put herself in a position to so engage. When seen in this way, open-mindedness can be considered a pre-condition for empathy, for one needs to first distance herself from her own experience (as framed within her own point of view) in order to (vicariously) enter into another's (as framed by the other's point of view).²⁵ This is not to say that every single instance of empathy must be grounded in an underlying open-mindedness, as spontaneous empathy is not uncommon, even in people who are quite narrow-minded. However, for someone to be an empathetic person, it is hard to see how it is possible without her also being open-minded (at least in some ways).

5.2. Open-mindedness and tolerance

Some may take open-mindedness to be no different from tolerance, for both seem to involve a kind of stepping outside of one's 'comfort zone' to welcome different beliefs, values, lifestyles, or cultures. However, despite this superficial similarity, the two involve quite different attitudes — being tolerant of your child's favorite music is much different from being open-minded about it.²⁶ For one thing, tolerance is not necessary for open-mindedness. Tolerance, according to T.M. Scanlon, 'requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them' (2003, 187). The key is 'acceptance' and 'permission,' or as Scanlon goes on to elaborate, non-interference. While neither tolerance nor open-mindedness requires agreement with the target, they differ in what they entail in the case of strong disagreement. The call for open-mindedness is a call to pay attention to these others, to engage with their difference rather than shy away from it. It is up to us (not to the demands of open-mindedness) to decide what to do after that engagement. Tolerance may be one option, but not the only one. The open-minded person will be acutely aware

of the limitations in her own thinking and experience that led to her 'strong disapproval' of the other's practice so that she is apt to realize the strength of her conviction is no proof of its truth. Thus, she will be wary of privileging her own conclusion when she cannot successfully defeat a challenge. The tolerant person, on the other hand, would hold on to her conclusion and hence 'tolerate' the other. In the case where one remains firm about her conviction even after an open-minded contact with the other, she need not tolerate, and tolerance may in fact be morally wrong. Such is the case of Daryl Davis' experience with the Klan members. It would be unwitting (perhaps even shameful), not admirable, for Davis to come to 'tolerate' the ideology of the Klan just because he defied social expectations and got to know them on a personal level. Perhaps we might say that, at least, open-mindedness requires tolerance of another's point of view (though not its *contents*). But this misconstrues the meaning of another's point of view for the open-mindedness person, since that point of view no more needs 'permission' to be and be what it is than one's own point of view.

In addition, tolerance is not sufficient for open-mindedness. One can be tolerant of those with different opinions or practices without knowing much about them, and more importantly, without moving beyond the point of view most familiar to her. When tolerance is used as a means to avoiding confrontation, one is comfortably shielded within her own beliefs and values, including the belief that the best way to deal with people so different from herself is to turn a blind eye and let them be. It may be objected that this would not be the virtuous kind of tolerance since it is done not for a moral reason, but for self-interest. Perhaps tolerance done from the right reason is after all an expression of open-mindedness. Scanlon's notion of 'pure tolerance' seems to fit this picture. In contrast to the instrumental kind of tolerance, someone with pure tolerance regards those with whom she disagrees as equal members of society:

Even though we disagree, they are as fully members of society as I am. They are as entitled as I am to the protections of the law, as entitled as I am to live as they choose to live. In addition (and this is the hard part) neither their way of living nor mine is uniquely the way of our society. These are merely two among the potentially many different outlooks that our society can include, each of which is equally entitled to be expressed in living as one mode of life that others can adopt. If one view is at any moment numerically or culturally predominant, this should be determined by, and dependent on, the accumulated choices of individual members of the society at large. (2003, 192)

On this characterization, there is some semblance of open-mindedness, as one is able to situate her own outlook within the larger context of a wide range of outlooks that other members of her society hold. But it's not clear whether the purely tolerant person would also take an interest in any of the alternative outlooks even though she deems them equally worthy to be considered for adoption by society as a whole. She might, but she does not have to. This means that even pure tolerance, an ideal in Scanlon's eyes, falls short of being so in the absence of sufficient open-mindedness.²⁷

6. Closing remarks

We are now in a position to address another worry: it seems a bad idea to be open-minded to everyone without a limit. While it may be fine for Davis to engage with Klansmen, for at least they have not lost all sense of human decency, it seems wrong to do the same with someone who is completely, incorrigibly evil.²⁸

One way to alleviate this worry is to point out, as I have argued earlier, that open-mindedness does not imply agreement with what one finds in another's experience or perspective. Nor does it rely on the hope that there remains something redeeming about the person. Open-mindedness toward an incorrigible, unrepentant wrongdoer therefore does not imply condonation.

In fact, I am rather wary of the idea of putting a limit on whom we can be open-minded to in general. Drawing such a line would amount to claiming that some people are just what we take them to be and nothing more. But this is dangerous. On Axel Honneth's analysis of 'invisibility,' a kind of 'non-existence in a social sense' (Honneth and Margalit 2001, 111) experienced by a black person in the eyes of some racist whites, or by the cleaning lady in the eyes of the house owner, rendering someone invisible is the first step toward mistreatment. The decision to close our minds off toward someone in effect makes her invisible for us. Indeed, as Honneth points out, social invisibility does not result from a failure of the perceiver to look properly, but rather from a failure or refusal to give proper recognition or regard to the person thereby rendered invisible (112–115). Open-mindedness urges us to give proper recognition even when our default perspective inclines us against it.

Notes

1. See, for example, Hare (1985), Zagzebski (1996), Riggs (2010), and Baehr (2011).
2. I use the two terms, 'epistemic' and 'intellectual,' interchangeably in this paper to refer to the property of pertaining to beliefs, knowledge, understanding and the like, as opposed to actions or feelings.
3. In fact, I doubt the achievement of such intellectual ends is what is on our mind when we praise what Davis did.
4. Baehr (2011), whose account of open-mindedness I will take up shortly, makes a similar point.
5. I follow Baehr in identifying the standpoint that one *tends* to fall back on as her 'default' standpoint. In most cases, this would be the *actual* standpoint one already occupies, but sometimes it can also be 'the one that the person is *tempted* by or *inclined* to take up' (2011, 151).
6. This is not to say that we necessarily occupy the self-interested point of view until we remind ourselves to take up the moral point of view. All we need to claim its 'default' status is the fact that we easily fall into it (see note 5).
7. Russell (2001) recommends a similar attitude towards the world, and calls the process of learning about the world with the full awareness of its difference from us 'self-enlargement.'

8. There are some similarities between what I call 'open-mindedness' and the personality trait called 'openness' or 'openness to experience' in the psychological literature. Both involve an interest in 'variety, novelty, and change' (McCrae and Costa 2008). One significant difference I see is that openness need not also involve detachment from one's default point of view. An avid traveler may seek out new and different experiences only to assimilate them into her existing outlook. To be open-minded, on the other hand, that outlook is itself subject to change in light of the new experiences.
9. Ben Ratliff's book, *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty* (2016), answers precisely the question of how we can be open-minded toward music. In the face of ever more intelligent algorithms carving out 'comfort zones' of musical preferences for us, we should learn to approach different kinds of music with 'a strategy of openness, a spirit of recognition' (10), argues Ratliff.
10. In his alternative proposal for understanding the nature of open-mindedness (as an epistemic disposition), Kwong (2016) places engagement at the center of open-mindedness. He describes engagement as 'making room' for new ideas or viewpoints in one's 'cognitive space', seeing how they might fit with her existing system of beliefs, and 'giv[ing] them serious consideration' (76). As with Baehr's view, I think Kwong's can be similarly extended for a broader notion of open-mindedness where the objects and forms of engagement need not be purely epistemic in nature.
11. Perhaps open-mindedness still *in principle* requires trying out? I think there are at least two reasons for why this requirement would be unrealistic: first, trying out a lifestyle or religion involves a much greater cost or risk than trying out new music; and second, trying out a lifestyle or religion can be tantamount to approving of it or judging it's good while trying out new music need not have this implication.
12. The idea that open-mindedness is not restricted to the cognitive domain is shared by some psychologists working on the personality trait of 'openness.' Woo et al. (2014), for example, claim that 'novel stimuli can appear in the form of novel experiential stimuli (e.g. new sensations, new cultural experiences) and that of original intellectual stimuli (e.g. new ideas, new theories) ... Thus, openness-related behaviors can be subsumed under at least two broad domains (or aspects): Openness to intellectual stimulation and openness to cultural experiences' (29).
13. Open-mindedness is not unique in this way. For instance, being charitable in donating to earthquake survivors is quite different from being charitable in interpreting the work by one's philosophical opponent. Being perceptive at a social gathering requires somewhat different skills from being perceptive in data analysis.
14. I am not claiming that the scope of morality has to be restricted to the human population. Since open-mindedness can take all kinds of objects, my account would work just as well with a broader view of morality that includes our relations with nonhuman animals, nature, and so on.
15. For example, Daryl Davis's open-mindedness risks inviting criticisms that by engaging with KKK members, he is compromising his values and principles because KKK members embody racism and bigotry. It might also look like Davis is failing to condemn these individuals by so engaging with them.
16. Nancy Snow presses this point in her comments on an earlier draft of this paper, with a compelling example: 'If, for example, Professor X has a long and documented record of sexually harassing and bullying women graduate students and untenured women colleagues, and Lawyer Y, when confronted with the

record, comments, “Oh, but people can change,” is Lawyer Y being open-minded or willfully ignoring evidence of bad behavior that should be addressed?”

17. I am grateful to Nancy Snow for this point, and for carving out the distinction between seeing open-mindedness as a personal virtue and seeing it as a moral virtue.
18. J.S. Mill’s defense of the liberty of thought and expression in *On Liberty* (1989) can be seen at the same time as a defense of the civic virtue of open-mindedness. Theorists of the deliberative process have followed suit in recognizing the role of open-mindedness: ‘Keeping an open mind, along with exposing ourselves to new information and diverse perspectives, is the essence of deliberation’ (Barabas 2004, 699). Bringing the point closer to home, Internet activist Pariser (2012) argues that the personalizing filters offered by websites result in a more narrow-minded citizenry, trapping us in a ‘filter bubble’ of information and viewpoints with which we already agree.
19. Properly qualified, of course, as I suggested at the beginning of this section.
20. I am grateful to both anonymous reviewers for the journal for pressing me on the connection between open-mindedness and Stephen Darwall’s recognition respect (1977).
21. An abusive relationship, for example, or one in which one party willfully refuses to reciprocate the care and concern of the other party, is not worth preserving. One might even say it is *bad* for such a relationship to keep going (see Friedman 2000).
22. Although these objections typically assume an intellectualist view of the moral virtue of open-mindedness and hence take it to be aimed at our *beliefs* and *judgments*, they can equally apply to my view that regards this virtue to consist in one’s *attitude* toward others. This is because, as noted in fn.15, our attitude towards someone (and the ways in which we relate to her), who carries with them certain values and principles, can reflect our own values and principles.
I’d like to note that I am using the word, ‘promiscuity’ in a different sense than Philip Ivanhoe in his paper, ‘Pluralism, toleration, and ethical promiscuity’ (2009). What he means by ‘ethical promiscuity’ is in fact quite close to what I mean by the moral virtue of open-mindedness — it is ‘a principled openness to the variety of value’ (320).
23. Cheshire Calhoun arrives at a similar point from a different path. In her paper, ‘Standing for Something’ (1995), Calhoun carves out a view of integrity that is more than a personal virtue. She argues that when an individual puts herself behind — ‘stands for’ — a set of values and principles in exercising integrity, she is not simply choosing for herself, but doing her part in a community of deliberators to evaluate competing values and principles. It is because of her responsibility to fellow deliberators that the individual must take great care in her judgment. Hence, Calhoun writes, ‘Arrogance, pomposity, bullying, haranguing, defensiveness, incivility, close-mindedness, deafness to criticism (traits particularly connected with fanaticism) all seem incompatible with integrity’ (259–60).
24. Admittedly, it sounds strange to say Davis is trying to *empathize* with the Klansmen, but I think this is largely due to the ambiguities in our use of the concept, ‘empathy.’ If we distinguish empathy from sympathy, and construe empathy as entering another’s point of view, then it would not be wrong to take Davis to be empathizing with his interlocutor, i.e. trying to understand what they think and how they feel from within their point of view.
25. Baehr (2011) makes the same point in his discussion of the relation between open-mindedness and other intellectual virtues. As he sees it, open-mindedness

often acts as a 'facilitating virtue' that puts one in a position to exercise certain other virtues such as empathy and creativity, and keeps one on course *during* the exercise of those other virtues (156–57).

26. An anonymous reviewer for the journal suggested this comparison.
27. There are other reasons for thinking that tolerance is not the ideal solution to living in a pluralistic society. One alternative is what Wong (2006) calls accommodation. Like toleration, accommodation aims at 'peaceful coexistence with the morally other' (251). But unlike toleration as non-interference, accommodation involves attempts at reconciliation with an eye towards sustaining cohesion in the community and minimizing serious conflicts. And unlike 'pure tolerance,' accommodation involves the further step of understanding how and why the different others came to adopt the beliefs and values they have. Galeotti (2002), arguing from a concern for social justice, also highlights the importance of engaging with the differences in those we tolerate. On her view, the majority's mere toleration of the minority without public *recognition* of the differences in the latter perpetuates the inequalities between them.
28. I thank Nancy Snow for raising this worry.

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