

## Open Mindedness as Engagement

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Jack M. C. Kwong

### Abstract

Open-mindedness is an under-explored topic in virtue epistemology, despite its assumed importance for the field. Questions about it abound and need to be answered. For example, what sort of intellectual activities are central to it? Can one be open-minded about one's firmly held beliefs? Why should we strive to be open-minded? This paper aims to shed light on these and other pertinent issues. In particular, it proposes a view that construes open-mindedness as *engagement*, that is, a willingness to entertain novel ideas in one's cognitive space and to accord them serious consideration.

**Keywords:** Open-Mindedness; Virtue Epistemology; Intellectual Virtues; Character Trait; Jason Baehr; Wayne Riggs.

### 1. Introduction

Not much has been written about open-mindedness in virtue epistemology.<sup>1</sup>

This apparent neglect is somewhat surprising, especially when virtue

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the topic of open-mindedness has received more attention in the philosophy of education, in particular, from William Hare (e.g., 1979, 1985, and 2003). Much of his work, for example, aims to defend open-mindedness as an educational ideal against misconceptions about the character trait. In this paper, however, I will not directly address Hare's definition of open-mindedness, which he construes in terms of a person's disposition to revise her views in light of sound objections. I agree with Wayne Riggs that this broad way of understanding the

epistemologists generally regard open-mindedness as one of the most important intellectual character virtues (Baehr 2011; Riggs 2010). There is still much that we do not know about the nature of open-mindedness. For example, what sort of intellectual activities are central to it? Is it possible for a person to be open-minded about beliefs which she holds firmly? Why should we strive to be open-minded? This paper aims to shed light on these and other pertinent issues. In particular, it argues for a view that construes open-mindedness as *engagement*, that is, a willingness to make room for novel ideas in one's cognitive space and to give them serious consideration.

The discussion will be structured as follows: First, I will examine two accounts of open-mindedness that have been proposed in virtue epistemology. My aim is to highlight what their proponents regard as genuine conditions of open-mindedness and to identify some of the central desiderata required for a satisfactory theory of open-mindedness. I will then formulate a preliminary counter-argument to demonstrate that neither of these accounts is capable of satisfying one another's desideratum. Second, I will explain what it is to construe open-mindedness as engagement, and argue that, of all the known approaches, engagement constitutes the conceptual core of open-mindedness. I conclude by showing how my account can satisfy the desiderata for open-mindedness in the other accounts to be dealt with here.

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intellectual virtue "seems nothing short of rationality itself" (2010, p. 179), and with Jason Baehr that its focus tends to be on a limited range of cases of open-mindedness (i.e., mostly conflict-based scenarios and at times, a position of neutrality)(2011, pp. 192-4). Moreover, the objections I raise against Riggs's and Baehr's views can, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to Hare's, as well.

## 2. Two Accounts of Open-Mindedness

In this section, I will examine the two most developed accounts of open-mindedness in character-based virtue epistemology (Baehr 2011; Riggs 2010), or what Guy Axtell refers to as ‘virtue responsibilist’ epistemologies (Axtell 1997). Both consider open-mindedness a character trait, as opposed to a sub-personal state like a cognitive faculty, ability, skill, or capacity. According to Jason Baehr, open-mindedness is a character trait that “necessarily makes certain demands on its possessor’s agency” (Baehr 2011, p. 204). In Wayne Riggs’s view, open-mindedness posits that “some degree of agential involvement is necessary for significant cognitive virtue” (Riggs 2010, p. 176). What sort of demands, then, does open-mindedness make on an agent, and how does an agent’s involvement turn open-mindedness into an intellectual virtue? Once these questions are addressed, I will then advance a preliminary argument to show that these accounts fail to meet one another’s desideratum. This will set the stage for the next section, in which I propose a view of open-mindedness that can, among other things, satisfy the desiderata of both of these accounts.

Riggs develops his view primarily out of concern for certain puzzles that arise from questions related to open-mindedness (ibid.). One puzzle of particular concern to him stems from the two-part query raised by Jonathan Adler: “How can one be open-minded about a strongly held belief; and why should one?” (Riggs, p. 179; Adler 2004, p. 123). Briefly, it seems incompatible that one can possess a strongly held belief, say *p*, and yet, can be open-minded about other views that stand

opposed to it. On the one hand, to believe  $p$  strongly is to believe it with conviction. On the other, to be open-minded about its alternative  $\sim p$  suggests that one has doubts about the truth of  $p$ . How, then, is it possible for a person to be open-minded about  $p$  while believing it strongly? I shall refer to this as the *compatibility problem*.

To solve this puzzle, Riggs appeals to Adler's definition of open-mindedness. According to Adler, open-mindedness is understood as "a second order attitude toward one's beliefs as believed, and not just toward the specific proposition believed" (Riggs, p. 130). To be open-minded in this sense, Riggs explains, is "to be aware of one's fallibility as a believer, and to be willing to acknowledge the possibility that anytime one believes something, *it is possible that one is wrong*" (ibid., original italics). Put this way, to be open-minded about  $p$  is not to entertain doubts about its truth but to take challenges against it seriously (i.e., give  $\sim p$  serious consideration) and to recognize the possibility that one could have made a mistake in arriving at  $p$ . As Riggs notes, since this willingness to take challenges seriously is compatible with one's believing in  $p$  strongly, the puzzle is thus dispelled.

Riggs, however, does not think that Adler's definition is sufficient. To him, it fails to explain how open-mindedness as an attitude is "efficacious in our cognitive lives", that is, how it "intrude[s] upon our habits of thought consistently and productively to produce the cognitive and overt 'behavior' typical of those we take to exemplify open-mindedness" (Riggs, p. 182). This is particularly evident in the case of an "otherwise virtuous believer", that is, a cognitive agent who has "mastered the other cognitive virtues" (ibid.). As Riggs notes, such a believer's engagement with less virtuous agents would likely be a waste of her time and

mislead her “into exchanging a truth for a falsehood” (ibid.). What reason, then, would such a believer have to be open-minded? I shall refer to this as the *motivational problem*.

Riggs’s solution is to supplement Adler’s definition with two “characteristics of thought” that a person must acquire in order to be genuinely open-minded. According to him, this person must first gain self-knowledge about her own cognitive weakness or bad habits of thought that might prevent her from seeing the truth of opposing views. She must then ‘self-monitor’ for signs of these weaknesses and bad habits and “take whatever prompted these habitual responses seriously” (Riggs, p. 183). According to Riggs, once we acquire these two characteristics of thought, our awareness of our own epistemic fallibility deepens and places us in a better position to correct these weaknesses and bad habits and thereby, increases our chance of getting to the truth. This is how the aforementioned virtuous believer can allow open-mindedness to inform or shape her habits of thought and produce relevant behaviors, for even she will have cognitive biases and blind spots.

Riggs’s account, in my view, falls short of giving us a general theory of open-mindedness. Stressing, as it does, an agent’s fallibility, its primary focus is on open-mindedness that is conflict-oriented. However, not all cases of open-mindedness involve a conflict with or challenge to cherished beliefs. Here is an example from Jason Baehr.

Imagine, for instance, an honest and impartial judge preparing to hear the opening arguments in a particular 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 argument she is preparing to hear. Nonetheless it seems that the judge might still listen to the arguments in an open-minded way or that she might conduct an open-minded inquiry into the case (Baehr 2011, p. 194).

As Baehr notes, the judge is neutral with respect to the opening arguments; she need not set aside any of her beliefs since none of them (significant or not) is challenged at the outset of the trial. Since Riggs's construal of open-mindedness is built on the requirement that a person take challenges to her beliefs seriously, it therefore does not account for cases of open-mindedness that are conflict-free. There is, however, a way for Riggs to get around this worry. He could concede that open-mindedness does not necessarily involve taking challenges, and that the remaining requirements of his view (i.e., self-knowledge and self-monitoring) can be used to explain the judge's disposition. Thus, in an effort to strive to be as impartial and fair as possible, it is plausible that the judge has hitherto spent much time reflecting on her own epistemic practices. She knows exactly what her cognitive weaknesses are and when they tend to arise, and monitors their occurrences whenever she finds herself in such cognitive contexts. As a result of her self-knowledge and self-monitoring, the judge thus knows exactly what it will take for her to be open-minded at the trial. Riggs's account can seemingly be modified to include conflict-free cases of open-mindedness.

Unfortunately, the modified account is still not sufficient. According to Baehr, there are cases of open-mindedness in which the agent is not required to perform any rational assessment at all. As he writes:

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 ... Here again it is extremely plausible to think that the persons in question might benefit from a kind of open-mindedness (Baehr, p. 196).

Here, Baehr thinks that it is plausible that open-mindedness can also bear on the process of understanding. In order to comprehend the "complex and mind-bending" aspects of Einstein's General Theory, the students have to "open their minds" in the sense that they have to loosen their grip on their "ordinary and commonsense ways of thinking about the world" (Baehr, p. 197). Baehr seems to suggest that maintaining a tight grip on these ordinary ways of thinking will close their minds off, making their minds incapable of stretching their parameters to accommodate

Einstein's General theory.<sup>2</sup> While Riggs's modified account plausibly applies to the judge, it is unlikely that it does to the science students. Unlike the judge, it is doubtful that the students have made it a habit to reflect on their epistemic practices to a comparable extent. They are just as unlikely to be moved by their "awareness of [their] own fallibility to search for domains and situations in which [they are] prone to these habits of thought that produce closed-mindedness" (Riggs, p. 183). Despite the absence of these two characteristics of thought, that is, a habitual reflection on epistemic practice and a self-awareness of fallibility, the students from Baehr's example can still be regarded as "opening their minds" as they try to grapple with Einstein's General Theory. Of course, it *is* possible that these students have developed an awareness of their epistemic practices and epistemic flaws. The point, rather, is that they need not have. As such, Riggs's two characteristics of thought are not necessary conditions of genuine open-mindedness.

Let us now consider Baehr's definition of open-mindedness. Baehr's central concern is to uncover the conceptual core of open-mindedness that unites the diverse examples described above. He construes an open-minded person as one

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<sup>2</sup> Here is a better way to illustrate Baehr's point. Suppose a person occupying a privileged social position is attempting to understand the 'lived experience' of members from an oppressed group. She can do so in an open-minded or a closed-minded way. An example of the latter is that she looks at the matter in a superficial and facile manner, and summarily dismisses the alternative lived experiences as impossible, or, in the case that she recognizes them to be possible, denounces them as incoherent or absurd. By contrast, someone who is open-minded will treat the issue more seriously. She may come to recognize that her previous biases and prejudices, and her assumptions about class and privilege have actually prevented her from seeing the standpoint of the oppressed; she may thus make a conscious effort to transcend (or detach or loosen herself from) them so as to make room for a fresh perspective. In this case, it seems appropriate to describe her transcendence of her usual ways of thinking about class and privilege, and her commitment to give the issue serious consideration, as an instance of open-mindedness.



who “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” (Baehr, p. 202). To elaborate, a default cognitive standpoint is what a person holds or accepts (or in some cases, is tempted or inclined to hold) when she is confronted with a distinct standpoint. Accordingly, the most important characteristic of open-mindedness – what Baehr calls the ‘conceptual core’ - is that a person is able to ‘move beyond’ this default or privileged standpoint so as to give the distinct standpoint fair and serious consideration. A crucial implication then is that such consideration is possible only if she distances herself from her default cognitive standpoint. Thus, the person who faces a challenge to her beliefs should ‘set aside’ or ‘loosen her grip’ on her default position before she can seriously take up or assess the opposing view. In the example of the judge given above, in order to refrain from making a hasty decision and to remain neutral, she may have to ‘detach’ herself from or ‘transcend’ the generalization that she is tempted by her default cognitive standpoint to make, so as to be able to assess the evidence impartially and comprehensively.

However, Baehr’s definition of open-mindedness, I contend, also falls short of being adequate. It is not clear whether it can offer a satisfactory solution to Riggs’s puzzle about the open-minded firm believer. Baehr does not explicitly address this puzzle, but a possible response may be derived from his discussion of the conditions when a person should be open-minded. In conflict-based cases, Baehr seems to think that it is reasonable for a person to be open-minded when being so is truth-conducive. For example, if a person has solid grounds for her belief *p*, is reliable in

her judgments related to  $p$ , but has reason to doubt the reliability of the source of  $not-p$ , then it would not be reasonable for her to think that being open-minded would bring her closer to truth (Baehr, pp. 211-2); in fact, being open-minded might result in her acquiring a suspect viewpoint, if not a complete falsehood. The relevant question in this context is: Should she be open-minded about  $not-p$  if the example is modified so that she now does not doubt the reliability of its source? This alteration, of course, is simply Riggs's puzzle. Notice that an appeal to truth-conduciveness will not be of much help here: if she thinks a serious consideration of  $not-p$  will help her get to the truth, then this suggests that she may think that  $not-p$  might be true. But this in turn implies that her confidence in  $p$  is not unequivocally firm to begin with. Appealing to truth-conduciveness therefore does not explain how a person can believe  $p$  firmly and simultaneously be open-minded about it. As is, Baehr's account does not readily yield a solution to Riggs's puzzle.

To summarize, the foregoing discussion has examined two views of open-mindedness that identify desiderata deemed crucial to an adequate theory of open-mindedness. I have argued instead that both are inadequate in that they fail to explain each other's desideratum. Riggs's definition fails to account for all the examples of open-mindedness that Baehr discusses, and Baehr does not offer a solution to Riggs's puzzle concerning the possibility of an open-minded, yet firm believer. The discussion so far has assumed that the identified desiderata are *bona fide* whereas it could perhaps be argued that not all of Baehr's examples are genuine instances of open-mindedness, or that Riggs's puzzle is merely an apparent one with an easy solution. Space does not allow a more in-depth critique of these views.

Suffice it to note that there are at least *prima facie* grounds for thinking that an alternative account of open-mindedness will be more satisfactory if it can overcome the shortcomings of both theories. In the next section, I will attempt such an account and in so doing, hope to advance substantive arguments that address the core issues in both Riggs's and Baehr's theories.

### **3. Open-Mindedness as Engagement**

The view of open-mindedness that I propose can be stated as follows: a person is open-minded when she is willing to *engage* with a viewpoint that is novel to her. In other words, she is willing to make room for it in her 'cognitive space', as it were, and to see how it might relate to, or connect with, her network or web of beliefs. Here, I define engagement broadly to encompass a wide range of cognitive activities. It can take the form of assessment, which enables an agent to evaluate the novel viewpoint in the light of relevant criterion (be it truth, consistency, coherence, validity, efficacy, or theoretical merits like explanatory scope, predictive yield, and unification). It can also refer to activities generally subsumed under the heading of 'understanding', such as trying to make sense of the viewpoint, to follow the argument where it leads, and to figure out how it might be true or why something is false or senseless. Other than this comprehensive understanding of engagement, there are, no doubt, other ways in which an agent can relate to a novel viewpoint. What is important to note is that all instances of engagement must involve an agent's willingness to invite the viewpoint into her cognitive space, and to connect with it in some manner; it is in this sense that we can say she 'opens up her mind' to

new ideas and is 'open-minded'. By contrast, to refuse to engage in any of these cognitive activities with respect to a novel viewpoint is one way to be closed-minded.

Not all instances of engagement, however, count as open-mindedness.<sup>3</sup> In order for an instance to count as such, it must be motivated in the right way and executed seriously. Specifically, an open-minded person, I submit, must be motivated by a desire for new truths and for a deeper understanding, which in turn drives her to make room for viewpoints other than her own and to give them serious consideration (cf. Zagzebski 1996, p. 131 and Baehr p. 202). An anthropologist's willingness to make an attempt to understand the native/indigenous cosmology of her subjects, for instance, exemplifies open-mindedness when (1) her motivation for doing so is based on a genuine desire for new knowledge and for a deepened understanding of cross-cultural ways of thinking about the origins of the universe, and when (2) her inquiry is conducted in a careful, fair, impartial and empathetic fashion. By contrast, she fails to display open-mindedness if her engagement was motivated instead by, say, the mere need to make her curriculum vitae look good or was not undertaken in a serious manner (e.g., she is quick to dismiss this alternative cosmology as irrational and naïve). My use of "engagement" in the following will presuppose that it is motivated in the right way and is conducted in a serious manner.

Construing engagement in this manner, I think, captures something intuitive and central about open-mindedness. The OED defines 'open-mindedness' as a

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous referee for clarifying this aspect of my account.

“[willingness] to consider new ideas,” while the Merriam Webster Dictionary characterizes it as being “receptive to new arguments or ideas”. Of course, there are diverse ways in which a person can consider or be receptive to new ideas. By defining engagement broadly, my account spells out possible ways in which an agent might respond to new ideas. Indeed, precisely because of its broad scope, my account can explain the examples of the three kinds of cognitive activities that Baehr discusses, and hence, can satisfy his desideratum for open-mindedness. What all of his examples have in common is that the agents are willing to engage with novel viewpoints in a manner as demanded by the epistemic context. They are willing to invite the novel idea or argument into their cognitive space for serious consideration. Thus, in conflict-based cases where a held or existing viewpoint is challenged, the agent is willing to engage with the opposing view by attempting to assess its truth-status or other appropriate evaluative properties. Similarly, in cases where there is no conflict, the agent would exercise rational assessment. For instance, the judge, in an effort to remain neutral, listens to the opening arguments and engages with them by trying to determine which is more plausible, credible, sufficient, or probable in setting the tone of the trial. Again, which set of criteria the judge will use will be determined by the context at hand. Finally, in cases that do not require any such rational assessment, the agent’s engagement may take any of the following forms: making sense of the novel viewpoint, figuring out how it can be true, considering its application to the relevant phenomenon in question, and determining its compatibility with the rest of what the agent believes. The science students demonstrate open-mindedness through two forms of engagement: first,

they make sense of the principles and predictions of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, and second, they decide how these ideas might fit in with what they currently believe. In short, engagement as I propose here can accommodate all of Baehr's examples and thus, satisfy his desideratum for open-mindedness.

An important difference between my view and Baehr's is that mine does not hold cognitive transcendence as a necessary requirement for open-mindedness (though it recognizes cognitive transcendence as a form of engagement as well). My view is silent on the means or mechanisms by which one can take up the merit of, or take seriously, a distinct standpoint. This is because it acknowledges that there are other means or mechanisms by which a person can do so, with the most appropriate or effective one prescribed by the epistemic task and context at hand. As I will demonstrate shortly, it is possible for a person to engage with, or take seriously, a novel standpoint *without* transcending her default cognitive standpoint. But before examining such a possibility, I want to explicate why engagement is the conceptual core of open-mindedness.

Both Riggs and Baehr think that open-mindedness is intellectually virtuous primarily because it is truth-conducive. According to Riggs, "paying attention to alternative views is a good strategy to discover our mistaken beliefs" (Riggs, p. 177), and "being open-minded is a better way for us to get to the truth than the alternative" (p. 178). Baehr writes, a "person[']s... engaging in the activity characteristic of open-mindedness ... is intellectually virtuous only if it is reasonable for [her] to believe that engaging in this activity ... may be helpful for reaching the truth (Baehr, p. 210)." While Riggs argues that the truth-conduciveness of open-

mindedness stems from a person's awareness of her fallibilist status as a believer and requires that she practice the two characteristics of thought mentioned above, Baehr attributes its principal facilitation to a person's ability to transcend her default cognitive standpoint.

While I am sympathetic to both of these views, I do not think that either is necessary for open-mindedness. Instead, what is primarily responsible for the truth-conduciveness of open-mindedness, and what underlies Riggs's and Baehr's positions, is engagement. That is, what is really doing the work is the agent's willingness to make room for novel ideas or arguments so as to carry out the relevant cognitive activity as prescribed by the context. It is precisely *because* she is willing to open up to alternative ideas and arguments in the first place, and then to take them seriously, that there is a *possibility* for her to get to the truth (or to detect falsehoods) and to revise her beliefs and perspective at the end of inquiry. If one were not willing to make room for, or open up to, these ideas, and to treat them seriously, one would not even have occasion (or would significantly limit the opportunity) to reflect on the truth-status of one's beliefs, or to revise them so as to improve one's epistemic lot. This 'making room for', 'opening up' or 'opening one's mind to', then, is the intellectual activity that is unique and basic to open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue. Understood this way, open-mindedness serves as a gateway, with the primary function of exposing us to alternative viewpoints such that serious consideration of them will potentially help improve our epistemic standing. It is in this way that open-mindedness is instrumental in increasing the number of true beliefs which we hold and improving the proportion of true to false

beliefs. But it is also truth-conducive in another important respect. As Linda Zagzebski points out, “we may legitimately call a trait or procedure truth conducive if it is a necessary condition for advancing knowledge...” (1996, p. 182).<sup>4</sup> Although she has such traits as creativity and inventiveness in mind, I think this alternative sense of truth-conduciveness can also be extended to apply to open-mindedness. To see how, think of the characteristic behavior of someone who is closed-minded. This is someone who is unwilling to engage with the novel viewpoint, either by refusing to make room for it in her cognitive space for any of the aforementioned cognitive activities, or in the event that she does, by not giving it serious treatment. For such a person, the gateway to new ideas is closed, and the prospect for epistemic betterment is cut off altogether. To advance knowledge for such a person, it is necessary that she engages.

If engagement is the conceptual core of open-mindedness, what role is there for cognitive transcendence or fallibilism to play? I have already suggested that we

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<sup>4</sup> Recently, some philosophers have argued that open-mindedness is not truth-conducive in the first sense (e.g., Cohen 2009; Carter and Gordon 2014; also see Montmarquet 1993, chapter 2). Noting that the connection between open-mindedness and truth is at best tenuous, Carter and Gordon, for instance, argue that the character trait can be regarded as an intellectual virtue only if it is connected with some epistemic end *other* than truth, such as understanding and wisdom. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess this issue in detail. My view is that some of these challenges can plausibly be met. For example, as I just noted, Zagzebski’s alternative sense of truth-conduciveness can be adapted as a direct response to Carter and Gordon (her discussion of the “Generality Problem” is also pertinent (1996, especially sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3)). Indeed, she is careful to note that a trait can still be truth-conducive in this alternative sense “... even though it generates very few true beliefs and even if a high percentage of the beliefs formed as the result of this trait or procedure are false” (p. 182). In the remainder of this paper, I will continue to assume, as Riggs and Baehr do, that open-mindedness is truth-conducive. Nevertheless, I will argue that it is also connected to other cognitive goods (e.g., understanding) that further contribute to its status as an intellectual virtue. My discussion of Riggs’s motivation problem below will highlight this point.



should think of cognitive transcendence as a *means* or *mechanism* by which one can come to engage with a novel idea or argument. In cases where one's beliefs are *especially* entrenched or firmly held, it may certainly be beneficial to transcend one's default standpoint in order to understand or see the merit of a different standpoint. As mentioned, a socially privileged person may need to set aside her usual way of thinking about class, power and entitlements, in order to get a sense of the hardships of marginalized groups. But it is not the only means by which one can engage, nor is it a necessary one. As will be shown below, there are other means for one to employ to engage with new ideas without having to set aside or suspend one's standpoint. As for Riggs's conditions for open-mindedness, I propose that we think of them rather as *reasons* for engagement. Having a second-order awareness of one's fallibility can certainly explain why a person might be willing to take challenges to her beliefs seriously. But such awareness is not the only way to explain why a person with firm beliefs takes challenges seriously. As I will show below, she may have other reasons for engaging with challenges to her own views, reasons that need not have anything to do with her status as a believer or with her cognitive weaknesses. To explain this, of course, is also to show how my view can satisfy Riggs's desideratum (specifically, to resolve the two aforementioned problems).

Let us first take what has been identified above as the *compatibility problem*. Recall Riggs's puzzle about a person having a firm belief in *p* but willing, at the same time, to be open-minded about it. As we noted earlier, Riggs's solution is to construe open-mindedness not in terms of having doubts about *p* but in terms of one's self-awareness of one's epistemic fallibility (i.e., a recognition that one could have made

a mistake in arriving at  $p$ ). In this manner, one can maintain a firm belief in  $p$  but is prepared to take challenges to  $p$  seriously. By contrast, there is an alternative explanation of how an agent can be open-minded about her firm belief  $p$ . The strategy is to find a way for her to engage with the opposing viewpoint while leaving her epistemic commitment to  $p$  intact. Here is one scenario of such a possibility: The agent can engage with  $not-p$  by trying to demonstrate that it is false.<sup>5</sup> That is, she can make room for it in her cognitive space with the specific aim of showing that in light of her current beliefs, it cannot be true. She can even do this with the initial mindset and conviction that  $p$  is true. Indeed, her unwavering confidence in  $p$  *at the outset* convinces her that  $not-p$  can only be false. Armed with this confidence, she goes about finding reasons to reject  $not-p$ . An example will be instructive.

Imagine a philosophy professor who has devoted much of his long career developing and defending materialist theories of the mind. One day, he attends a talk by a colleague who is an advocate of substance dualism, and learns about a new argument with a conclusion ( $not-p$ ) that negates a central materialist tenet ( $p$ ) that he holds strongly.<sup>6</sup> A confirmed materialist, he reacts immediately to the argument by dismissing it as neither valid nor threatening, just as he would to any argument

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<sup>5</sup> One way in which she might carry out this task is to use the method of indirect proof or *reductio ad absurdum*: she assumes the truth of the proposition that she seeks to reject (e.g.,  $not-p$ ) by attempting to draw a contradiction from it.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth emphasizing that this opposing argument must be recognized by the professor to be *novel* in some non-trivial respect. This condition is built into the definition and must be met in order for open-mindedness to be applicable. If the opposing argument is one with which the professor is already familiar and to which he has previously given serious consideration, he need not engage with it; to do so would be a waste of both his time and effort. Moreover, his lack of engagement with a previously considered idea is not an instance of his failing to be open-minded, but one to which the concept of open-mindedness does not apply.

that presupposes or originates from substance dualism. He wants to be able to demonstrate that the argument is invalid or flawed. This is not because he suddenly has doubts about his materialist tenet. In fact, he continues to regard it as unassailable and take its truth for granted; the need to determine *whether* his colleague's objection is faulty or not never even crosses his mind. What explains his willingness to take his colleague's polemical viewpoint seriously is that he is motivated by a desire to find out *how* or *where exactly* this new novel viewpoint goes wrong, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the debate. In addition, he considers it good epistemic exercise to defend his own views in the face of challenges, even if he does not think much of so-called challenges. The professor thus sets out to deal with his colleague's opposing viewpoint.

What this example demonstrates is that there are alternative ways to explain how a person with cherished beliefs can take challenges seriously. The professor can engage with his colleague's objection (*not-p*) with an unwavering confidence in the truth of his firmly held philosophical tenet (*p*). More importantly, what explains his willingness to engage has nothing to do with considerations related to his fallibilism as a believer or his cognitive weaknesses. Rather, it has everything to do with his desire for new truths and a deeper understanding of the debate, and to keep up the epistemic maintenance of his beliefs. Indeed, there are still other ways in which the professor can engage. The example can be modified to accommodate the following, so that the professor can try (1) to analyze the way in which the objection makes a subtle, though innovative, move with the concept of supervenience; (2) to get a deeper understanding of how his tenet can be a response

to certain issues that arise from substance dualism; (3) to analyze not the content, but the *form* or *style*, of the argument behind the objection; (4) to study the objection so as to find additional ways to buttress his already strong belief in the tenet. All of these forms of engagement are examples of ways in which one can take an opposing argument seriously without yielding an inch of one's ground. Moreover, an appeal to any of these will similarly explain the professor's willingness to engage with the objection. As in the original example, he will do so with an unwavering confidence in his tenet. Contrary to Riggs, then, an agent's awareness of his own fallibilism is not necessary for accounting for the possibility of a firm but open-minded believer.

There is a likely objection to this that needs to be addressed. I just noted that the agent's willingness to engage with *not-p* can be partly related to her unwavering confidence in *p*. However, this seems counter-intuitive: How can a person with an *unshaken confidence* in her belief be regarded as open-minded? Does such a confidence not suggest that her mind is already closed to all pertinent novel viewpoints? I do not think so. First, her unshaken confidence *would* amount to closed-mindedness if it prevented her altogether from entertaining the novel standpoint, or considering it seriously. However, this is not the case with the professor, as he is still willing to engage with the argument despite his confidence. Second, it is important to note the time and stage *when* the agent exhibits this confidence and the extent to which she is responsive to reason. So far, I have been careful to point out that the agent displays such confidence only *at the outset* of her engagement with *not-p*. Notice, however, that being unwaveringly confident about *p*

is not necessarily incompatible with engaging with *not-p* seriously. Furthermore, the agent need not remain so firm through the entire time she engages with *not-p*. Thus, returning to the above example, in trying to refute the substance dualism argument, the professor may discover, to his surprise, that his existing beliefs and arguments actually fall short of the task.<sup>7</sup> He may be unable to address some of the critical parts of the argument or may realize that certain crucial aspects of it bring out a contradiction or inconsistency in his own beliefs that has hitherto eluded him. If the professor is rational or possesses other intellectual character virtues that render him careful, attentive, objective and rigorous, then he will respond accordingly. He will have to declare his attempt to reject the argument a failure and either to suspend or give up his materialist tenet or to accept the conclusion of the opposing argument as true. Conversely, if he does not encounter any of the aforementioned obstacles in his inquiry, his confidence will be reinforced and remain steadfast. Either way, the professor's willingness to engage seriously with the argument reflects his open-mindedness.

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<sup>7</sup> Here, I am *not* suggesting that the professor's open-mindedness consists in his realization that he is unable to meet the objection, and thus, his eventual acceptance of the opposing standpoint. He would *equally* be deemed open-minded even if he had the resources to expose the argument based on substance dualism as fallacious. What matters is that he has given the argument serious consideration. It is therefore important to note that a person's being open-minded about some novel viewpoint is *neutral* with respect to what he does with it after serious consideration. (i.e., whether he subsequently accepts or rejects it (Kwong *forthcoming*)). Rather, the professor's open-mindedness consists principally in his willingness in the first place to put himself in a position so that he can make such a determination. Again, note that he could have easily refused to engage at all with the opposing argument on the principle that it is based on substance dualism. In such a case, he would undoubtedly be regarded as closed-minded.

What this response to the likely objection shows is that there is allowance in my view for an agent to change her mind at a subsequent time. The objection holds only if the agent's grip on her beliefs is unresponsive to reason and remains steadfast even in the face of a critical challenge. In such a case, the agent, I submit, is no longer seriously engaged in her consideration of *not-p*. Even though she initially invited the novel viewpoint into her cognitive space, she has since ceased to be open-minded about it. However, as I have suggested, this need not be so: it is possible that while engaging with *not-p*, she may come to realize that her resources are insufficient for rejecting it and hence, she has to acknowledge that she is not up to the task or that *not-p* is true (or conversely, *p* is false). To return to an earlier point, it is precisely because of this latter possibility of revising one's existing views, that open-mindedness is truth-conducive, and can, therefore, be regarded as an intellectual virtue. And it is worth emphasizing again that what enables the agent to be in a position where she might increase her chance of gaining knowledge or true beliefs (or of eliminating false ones) is her willingness in the first place to make room in her cognitive space for novel ideas and to consider them seriously. It is this willingness to engage that I argue constitutes her open-mindedness. If the professor has not done so with the argument that challenges his tenet or if his steadfast grip on his tenet *prevents* him from engaging with the argument, he will not come to see that the tenet he holds so firmly turns out not to be true. His close-mindedness, in other words, will shut him out from the opportunity to improve his epistemic status.

Incidentally, this last point also helps to clarify what has been called above the *motivational problem* (Riggs), namely, why we would want to be open-minded,

or in terms of my account, why we would want to engage. The answer is that our willingness to engage with novel ideas places us in a position such that we increase our chances of exposing our mistaken beliefs and of getting to the truth. But there are two problems with this answer. First, it is not quite complete or inclusive enough, for it is derived solely from those forms of engagement that take shape as responses to challenges (or, as Baehr puts it, “conflicts”), with truth as the cognitive aim. As a result, other forms of engagement that do not have an explicit tie to truth are overlooked, and their epistemic values or goods, ignored. Second, this answer does not help to address “the other variety” of the motivational problem, namely, why an “otherwise epistemically virtuous believer” would want to be open-minded (p. 178).

Fortunately, the two problems are connected: resolving one will help resolve the other. The forms of engagement that have been overlooked, at least in addressing why open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue, include cognitive activities that are typically subsumed under “understanding”. As we saw in the example of the philosophy professor, one of his reasons for wanting to take the counterargument seriously is to get a deeper *understanding* of the conceptual map where the debate is located. He can do this, say, by trying to draw contrast and comparison between the concepts and assumptions of his tenet and those in the counterargument. Notice, however, that understanding, as Zagzebski and others have argued, is a distinct epistemic value or cognitive good from truth in its own right (e.g., Grimm 2011, Kvanvig 2003, Zagzebski 2001) and need not be in the service of other values or goods. Assuming that this is correct, another reason why

we should want to be open-minded is to increase our understanding by engaging with novel ideas. The willingness to do so, depending on the form of engagement or cognitive activity prescribed by the context, can be a reliable way of deepening our understanding of the subject matter at hand.

Once we acknowledge this, we can explain why someone who is an “otherwise virtuous believer” should want to be open-minded. Although this person may have “every reason to think that her own views are much more likely to be true than any other views she is likely to find represented among those around her” (Riggs, p. 178), she can still find room for a deeper understanding of the issues and debates pertinent to her own views. No one, not even someone who consistently and successfully practices all (however defined) of the intellectual virtues, can claim to have a complete understanding (whatever this may amount to) of the things about which she has ideas or beliefs. What she can gain from being open-minded is an expansion of various kinds of connections between her existing beliefs and novel ideas. The exercise will result in her better ‘grasp’ of the concepts involved.

I will conclude this section by following up on an earlier note. I mentioned that contrary to Baehr, what is central to open-mindedness is not an agent’s ability to transcend her default cognitive standpoint, but her willingness to engage with novel ideas. I suggested that we should think of cognitive transcendence as a means or mechanism for such an engagement, while allowing that there are other ways to do so. Notice that the same arguments used to show how my account can satisfy Riggs’s desideratum can also be used to show that it is not necessary for an agent to detach or transcend her default cognitive position in order to be open-minded. What



the arguments demonstrate is that an agent need not always set aside or loosen her grip on her conviction in order to take the novel viewpoint seriously. Indeed, as in the example of the philosophy professor, initial conviction may even help to initiate one's engagement with the opposing view and need not stand in one's way of taking it seriously. Notice that in my view, if an agent is to change her mind at the end of her deliberation, it will not have to be a function of her setting aside or loosening her grip on her beliefs. Rather, it can be a consequence of her recognition, *from her own standpoint*, of the deficiency of her beliefs (or of the strength of the opposing viewpoint). But more importantly, what allows her the opportunity for such a recognition or realization in the first place is her effort to make room for *not-p* in her cognitive space and to give it serious consideration. Therefore, it is engagement – rather than Baehr's requirement of cognitive transcendence – that constitutes the heart of open-mindedness.

Here is an alternative way to establish that engagement, as opposed to cognitive transcendence, is central to open-mindedness. Suppose the philosophy professor becomes aware of a novel argument that challenges a cherished tenet of his. Given his desire for new truths and a deeper understanding of the debate involving this tenet, he decides to look into the argument. After carefully examining it, he senses that he does not quite fully comprehend it though he cannot pinpoint where exactly he is having difficulties. So he seeks out advice from his colleagues, who in turn make him see that his failure to grasp the argument is due to an entrenched assumption that he holds. Wanting to understand the argument, he therefore detaches himself from this assumption and proceeds to examine the

argument in a new light. In this scenario, the professor decides *in the midst of his serious consideration* that he needs to modify his approach. But notice that it is extremely plausible to think that the professor is *already* being open-minded before he decides to transcend his default viewpoint. In fact, if what I am arguing is correct, his open-mindedness can be located in his initial willingness to consider a viewpoint contrary to his own and in his subsequent attempt to carry out the task seriously. Indeed, it is precisely due to his commitment to give it serious consideration that *leads* him to detach from his entrenched assumption. What this shows, then, is that *if* transcendence is involved at all, it is *brought about* by engagement. Again, engagement constitutes the heart of open-mindedness.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that open-mindedness ought to be construed in terms of engagement. On this view, a person is open-minded when she is willing to engage with a novel idea, that is, when she is willing to make room for it in her cognitive space and to give it serious consideration. I argue that engagement, as opposed to cognitive transcendence or an agent's awareness of her fallibilism, is what is central to open-mindedness, and is principally responsible for making open-mindedness an intellectual virtue. Lastly, I show how construing open-mindedness in terms of engagement has the merit of satisfying both Baehr's and Riggs's desiderata: it can account for a wide variety of examples of open-mindedness, and

explain how it is possible for a person to be open-minded while holding firm beliefs and why we or any “otherwise virtuous believer” would want to be open-minded.<sup>8</sup>

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