

Open-Mindedness, Critical Thinking, and Indoctrination

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Abstract

William Hare has made fundamental contributions to philosophy of education. Among the most important of these contributions is his hugely important work on open-mindedness. In this paper I explore the several relationships that exist between Hare's favored educational ideal (open-mindedness) and my own (critical thinking). I argue that while both are of central importance, it is the latter that is the more fundamental of the two.

Introduction

In this paper I focus on William Hare's work on open-mindedness, an ideal that Hare has clarified and defended powerfully and tellingly. It is not exaggeration to say that Hare's work put open-mindedness on the philosophy of education map. I will not challenge this work; on the contrary, I find Hare's account of the character and importance of open-mindedness compelling and completely persuasive. However, it raises a question that has not received much attention: what is the relation between open-mindedness and other important educational aims and ideals? In particular, what is its relation to the ideal I have myself defended, that of critical thinking?

I was stimulated to think about this question by a forthcoming paper by Eamonn Callan and Dylan Arena (2009). In their paper, "Indoctrination", Callan and Arena

develop an account of indoctrination according to which the fundamental feature of the phenomenon is the resulting closed-mindedness and close-minded belief of the indoctrinated student:

[T]he inculcation of close-minded belief is indoctrination. (25)¹

This contrasts with my own view, according to which the mark of the indoctrinated student is rather the non-evidential style with which she holds her indoctrinated beliefs, which is itself a failure of critical thinking.² Hence the question concerning the relation between close-mindedness and critical thinking.

Callan and Arena's discussion is exemplary in several respects. First, it embraces an 'outcome' approach to indoctrination, according to which indoctrination is best understood in terms of its effects on student learning/beliefs. (Full disclosure: I have defended this approach myself, in Siegel 1988, ch. 5.) Second, it explains convincingly both the attractions and the weaknesses of the three traditional accounts of indoctrination, according to which indoctrination is to be understood in terms of the intention of the teacher, the methods employed by the teacher, or the doctrinal nature of the subject matter. Third, it emphasizes the important points that indoctrination and close-mindedness (a) are matters of degree, and needn't be thought of as all-or-nothing affairs, and (b) are not necessarily permanent conditions, in that an indoctrinated person can overcome her indoctrination and close-mindedness over time.

While I am generally quite sympathetic with the account of indoctrination in terms of close-mindedness articulated and defended by Callan and Arena for the reasons

just rehearsed, one question bothered me: is close-mindedness the fundamental feature of the indoctrinated mind, or is it rather a manifestation of a more fundamental feature of such minds, namely, a non-critical or non-evidential style of belief? Since I have argued for just such an account myself (Siegel 1988, ch. 5), this question was one I quickly decided to pursue. I do that next. But the question can be pursued more generally, i.e., without reference to indoctrination: given that both open-mindedness and critical thinking are important educational aims – we rightly want our students to be open-minded, and to be critical thinkers – what is the relation between these two worthy aims? Is one logically or conceptually more fundamental than the other? Is either a necessary or sufficient condition of the other? I pursue these questions in the following section.

Close-Mindedness, Non-Evidential Style of Belief, and Indoctrination

While Callan and Arena plump for the fundamentality of close-mindedness to the correct account of indoctrination, their account actually depends on the victim of indoctrination having a non-evidential style of belief as much as it does close-mindedness:

Insufficient regard for evidence is essential to an adequate conception of indoctrination, or so we shall argue. (11-12)

[E]xcessive resistance to [belief] revision does seem to be symptomatic of the indoctrinated mind, as we intuitively understand that condition. (13)

Those whom we suspect of being indoctrinated may devote themselves to winning converts and exposing the errors of all who disagree with them, and that cannot be done without heeding relevant evidence. But when belief is *held* regardless of the evidence, its maintenance has been divorced from consideration of the evidence, however extensive that consideration may be for other purposes, such as proselytizing. This condition of non-evidential maintenance, like unshakable belief, is also redolent of the intellectual rigidity we intuitively associate with being indoctrinated. (13, emphasis in original)

...the effect of indoctrination has to do...with some illicit breach between conviction on the one hand and the assessment of the evidence on the other. (14)

This certainly sounds as though the mark of the indoctrinated mind is its non-evidential style of belief – just the view I favor. Indeed, the situation is even more complex, in that Callan and Arena’s account of close-mindedness seems itself to depend upon a failure of critical thinking, and more specifically, upon a non-evidential style of belief:

To believe P close-mindedly is to be unable or unwilling to give due regard to reasons that are available for some belief or beliefs contrary to

P because of excessive emotional attachment to the truth of P. (14,
emphasis in original)

On this account of the matter, being close-minded with respect to a given belief P is a matter of believing that P non-evidentially, coupled with a particular causal explanation of the non-evidential style (i.e., caused by “excessive emotional attachment to the truth of P”). Callan and Arena argue that that causal explanation is, along with lack of due regard to reasons, a further necessary condition of close-mindedness:

What also seems necessary is a special emotional investment in the truth of some belief that an open mind regarding that belief would threaten: the belief has become integral to the individual’s understanding of who she is and why her life matters so that seriously considering evidence contrary to the belief is threatening to her very identity. (16)

Callan and Arena’s discussion of this threat, its psychological dimensions, the related intellectual vices of intellectual cowardice and intellectual arrogance, and the distinction between the psychological depth and breadth of close-mindedness (16-18) is a suggestive bit of moral psychology, although I would not myself want to rule out other causal paths to close-mindedness – some of which Callan and Arena acknowledge elsewhere (e.g., 19). However, the point I want to pursue concerning the relation between close-mindedness and non-evidential style of belief can be pursued independently of this causal question, so I will set that question aside.

Callan and Arena's main reason for thinking that close-mindedness offers a better account of indoctrination than non-evidential style of belief is that close-mindedness, unlike disregard of the evidence, need not be total:

So if we are trying to make sense of indoctrination as a practice that warrants moral disapproval, then the concept of close-mindedness, which admits varying degrees, seems better suited to capture the full range of relevant outcomes than [belief held regardless of the evidence]. (15)

I agree that close-mindedness admits of degrees. But a disregard of relevant evidence, and non-evidential style of belief more generally, also admit of degrees. If so, this point is not enough to favor close-mindedness over non-evidential style of belief as the key to indoctrination.³

I think the key question is: does giving "due regard to reasons" in Callan and Arena's account of close-mindedness involve just acknowledgement of and attention to available reasons, or the competent evaluation of such reasons as well?⁴ If the former, one can be open-minded and yet fail to think critically; if the latter, the open-minded person is guaranteed to be a critical thinker because critical thinking is built into open-mindedness. To put the matter slightly differently: is the open-minded person, in virtue of her open-mindedness, automatically or necessarily a competent evaluator of reasons? Does open-mindedness, that is, include the reason assessment component of critical thinking? To pursue these questions, we must set aside issues involving the proper

account of indoctrination, and turn directly to the relations between open-mindedness and critical thinking.

Open-Mindedness, Style of Belief, and Critical Thinking: Multiple Relationships and the Question of Fundamentality

I suggested above that the fact that close-mindedness admits of degrees is not enough to favor close-mindedness over non-evidential style of belief as the key to indoctrination. I now want to move beyond indoctrination, and argue that we should not favor open-mindedness over critical thinking as the fundamental epistemic ideal of education. On the contrary, it is critical thinking that is more fundamental.

The main reason for thinking so is that open-mindedness appears not to have anything to do with the *quality* of open-minded thinking and the belief that results from it. Rather, it seems that an open-minded person can be open-minded and yet think and believe *badly*: she can give ‘due regard to reasons’ and yet assess those reasons incompetently or mistakenly; she can pay full attention to reasons, evidence and argument – give them ‘due regard’ – and yet handle them badly from the epistemic point of view, and so believe open-mindedly but incompetently.

Is this right? Can a person think and believe open-mindedly yet badly? Here we must examine in more detail the character of open-mindedness as articulated by its most well-known and -respected advocate, William Hare.

Hare’s classic account of open-mindedness, *Open-mindedness and Education*, opens with a very brief gloss: open-mindedness essentially involves “a willingness to revise and reconsider one’s views.” (Hare 1979, p. x) A bit more expansively, he writes

that “a person must be both willing *and* able to revise his own position if he is to be open-minded” (Hare 1979, p. 8, emphasis in original), and that “an open-minded person is one who is willing and able to revise his beliefs.” More expansively still, he says:

We do not want to make imagination, cleverness, or creativity necessary conditions of open-mindedness. Thus it is not the case that the ability to get results is a necessary condition of open-mindedness, but it is necessary that the person should not have been made incapable of the activity of giving consideration to such objections as others raise.

A person who is open-minded is disposed to revise or reject the position he holds if sound objections are brought against it, or, in the situation in which the person has no opinion on some issue, he is disposed to make up his mind in the light of available evidence and argument as objectively and as impartially as possible. (Hare 1979, pp. 8-9)

The mention of ‘sound objections’ suggests that open-mindedness requires recognizing actually sound objections *as* sound – that is, evaluating the objections accurately or correctly – thus making open-mindedness depend not just on the ability and willingness to revise beliefs, but on the epistemic *quality* of revision as well. And I must acknowledge that other passages in Hare’s work suggest this as well.⁵ But the idea that the quality of belief-maintenance and -revision is a necessary condition of open-mindedness seems to contradict the clear majority of Hare’s glosses on the latter notion, including his explicit declaration, just cited, that ‘it is not the case that the ability to get

results is a necessary condition of open-mindedness.’ Rather, Hare’s official account of the notion seems to be that the necessary conditions of open-mindedness do not include the quality of belief revision, but rather just the willingness and ability to revise beliefs, along with the disposition to ‘objectively and impartially’ – but not necessarily epistemically correctly – consider ‘available evidence and argument.’ A further citation lends weight to this interpretation of Hare’s view of the matter:

[I]n saying that [a] person is open-minded, we reveal our assessment of how we think the person *would* act should objections be raised to his view. He would give attention to the objections, he would make revisions in a certain context, he would give up a view altogether. In short, we judge that he is disposed to reconsider. (Hare 1979, p. 9, emphasis in original)

This interpretation is further supported by Hare’s discussion of rationality. (Hare 1979, p. 11-14) Tellingly, he writes:

[A] person may fall short of rationality by offering an argument which is invalid; let us say that he commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent. He asks that we accept that if p then q. Then he points out that q. He concludes by affirming p. We, of course, will rightly charge that this is irrational, that it does not follow. But we are not at all entitled to say that he is not open-minded just because he has committed a fallacy. In the light of our reply, we may see at once that he is disposed to withdraw the

argument. A person not very adept at logic might even *tend* to commit fallacies of this sort yet deserve the ascription open-minded on the basis of his disposition to withdraw such fallacious arguments when the flaw is pointed out. (Hare 1979, pp. 11-12, emphasis in original)

It seems clear that if this person can rightly be declared open-minded even though his reasoning and subsequent beliefs are irrational, then quality of reasoning and belief cannot be a necessary condition of open-mindedness. Rather, as Hare says later on this page, “the open-minded attitude is precisely that of being willing to form and revise our views in the light of relevant and pertinent considerations.” (Hare 1979, p. 12) Thus, at least in his classic early account of it, open-mindedness is on Hare’s view a matter of having the ability to revise beliefs in the face of new evidence and argument, a willingness to do so, and, more strongly, the disposition to do so. It involves the *attitude* of “willing[ness] to revise one’s views in the light of counter-evidence.” (Hare 1979, p. 129; see also p. 60) It does not, however, require that the open-minded person’s consideration of the evidence and argument be of high epistemic quality. I’m open-minded if I attend to the new evidence and arguments that come my way, however badly I reason with and about them. Hare’s summary of his chapter-length analysis:

...the trait of open-mindedness qualifies a person’s activities in thinking, chiefly his ability and willingness to form and revise his views in the light of evidence and argument. This will be unpacked into a variety of dispositions such as a willingness to consider objections, to subject his

own views to critical scrutiny, to seek out objections to his own position, and so on. The context will determine which of these more specific criteria are demanded. (Hare 1979, p. 20)

is completely in keeping with this interpretation.

Hare reiterates this account in his subsequent *In Defence of Open-mindedness*:

...open-mindedness involves a willingness to form and revise one's views as impartially and as objectively as possible in the light of available evidence and argument. (Hare 1985, p.3)

...th[e] fundamental commitment to rational appraisal ...is the hallmark of open-mindedness. (Hare 1985, p. 97)

Hare's more recent discussions echo these earlier accounts:

Properly understood, open-mindedness is a fundamental intellectual virtue that involves a willingness to take relevant evidence and argument into account in forming or revising our beliefs and values, especially when there is some reason why such evidence and argument might be resisted by the individual in question. (Hare 2003, p. 76)

Open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue properly ascribed when an individual or a community is disposed to take into account all that is relevant to forming a sound judgment and likewise disposed to reconsider judgments already made, or in formation, in the light of emerging difficulties, especially when it is tempting to avoid acting in these ways. (Hare 2003a, p. 4)

On the basis of these several citations, it seems clear that, on Hare's account of it at least, open-mindedness involves the ability, willingness and disposition to reconsider one's beliefs in the light of new (to the believer) evidence, arguments, and potentially countervailing considerations. It does not require the ability to assess these new considerations correctly. From the epistemic point of view, it is quite possible to reason open-mindedly but badly, and to believe open-mindedly but unjustifiably, incompetently and even irrationally.⁶ I think Hare is right about this – open-mindedness is one very good thing; evaluating reasons, evidence and arguments competently another.

If this point is correct, what should we say about the relationships obtaining between open-mindedness and critical thinking? We should say at least the following:

i) Open-mindedness is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of critical thinking:

Can one be open-minded and yet an uncritical thinker/believer? Yes: one can believe open-mindedly but fail to master (or lack the disposition to believe, judge and act in accordance with) the reason-assessment component of critical thinking. That is, one

can think, reason and believe open-mindedly but badly. So open-mindedness is not a sufficient condition of critical thinking; being open-minded does not insure that one's thinking or believing meets relevant standards of epistemic quality.

But one cannot be a critical thinker without being open-minded, because open-mindedness – the ability and disposition to seek reasons and evidence, and to believe in accordance with their proper evaluation – is a central aspect of the critical spirit component of critical thinking. If one is not open-minded, one lacks the critical spirit, and so lacks a central, necessary component of critical thinking. So open-mindedness is a necessary condition of critical thinking.⁷

Putting these two points together: open-mindedness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of critical thinking.

ii) Critical thinking is a sufficient (but not necessary) condition of open-mindedness:

Can one be a critical thinker and yet be close-minded? No. If one is a critical thinker, one has the critical spirit – which includes a willingness and ability to reconsider one's beliefs in the light of new reasons and evidence – and so is open-minded. So being a critical thinker is sufficient for being open-minded.

On the other hand, one can be open-minded but not a critical thinker – as we have just seen – if, for example, one fails to evaluate candidate reasons and evidence in epistemically appropriate ways. That is, one can reason and believe open-mindedly but badly. So being a critical thinker is not a necessary condition of open-mindedness.

Putting these two points together: critical thinking is a sufficient but not a necessary condition of open-mindedness.

iii) If open-mindedness is necessary but not sufficient for critical thinking, and critical thinking is sufficient but not necessary for open-mindedness, then critical thinking is the more fundamental epistemic ideal of education. For the achievement of open-mindedness leaves us, if we are to be critical thinkers, still needing to master the several epistemic ingredients of the reason assessment component of critical thinking – mastering the many (general and subject-specific) principles of reason assessment, as well as the general theoretical understanding of what might be called the *epistemology of reasons*,⁸ along with that portion of the critical spirit that goes beyond open-mindedness. To put the point in perhaps misleadingly temporal terms: one's becoming open-minded is part of the journey toward becoming a critical thinker – not the other way around. When one is a critical thinker, one is *eo ipso* open-minded. Open-mindedness is a component of the overarching ideal of critical thinking.⁹

Conclusion: On Educational Aims and Ideals, and another Brief Look at Indoctrination

It is worth noting that Hare's view is not that open-mindedness is either the only or the most fundamental epistemic aim of education, but only that it is a necessary aim:

...the claim is not that open-mindedness is the sole aim of education. It is claimed here that it is a necessary aim of education. (Hare 1979, p. 63)

My own view, that critical thinking is 'first among equals' among educational aims and ideals, because any claim in support of the fundamentality of any other ideal would depend upon critical thinking itself for its vindication (Siegel 1988, p. 137), is in this respect more ambitious. But Hare and I are agreed that open-mindedness is not only an important aim, but a necessary one, for any education worthy of the name. Indeed I have not offered here a single substantive criticism of Hare's work on open-mindedness, which I continue to think correct and to regard with great admiration. It was not Hare's many discussions, but rather Callan and Arena's treatment of indoctrination, that prompted my concern about the relationship between open-mindedness and critical thinking.

So what should we say about that treatment? Are Callan and Arena right that teaching is best seen as morally objectionable indoctrination just when it results in close-mindedness, rather than a non-evidential, and so non-critical, style of belief?

I confess to conflicting intuitions here. If I inculcate student beliefs in such a way that their credulity and sloth, which my teaching has fostered, render them unable to think critically about those beliefs, and so results in the students believing them non-evidentially, have I not indoctrinated them? It seems to me that I have, although I am happy to grant that my teaching has not rendered them close-minded. But I can see the force of Callan and Arena's point; my students' indoctrinated states are not the result of close-mindedness, but rather (in this example) of my teaching's rendering them credulous or intellectually slothful. My inclination now is to think that one could go either way here, but that the case for the fundamentality of critical thinking made above extends to our understanding of indoctrination, and lends support to the claim that indoctrination is

better seen as a matter of non-evidential style of belief rather than close-mindedness. Going this way would give us a more unified overall theoretical understanding of education, by connecting our account of fundamental ideals with that of indoctrination. This sort of theoretical unification is not nothing. But neither it is determinative; it is just one additional point in favor of understanding indoctrination in terms of non-evidential style of belief. So I would welcome, and be open to, additional argument in support of Callan and Arena's account of indoctrination in terms of close-mindedness.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that the issue separating us is a relatively small one. The question is: are open-minded but non-evidential believers possibly victims of indoctrination? Callan and Arena answer in the negative: if the believers are open-minded, they haven't been indoctrinated, no matter with what other intellectual vices their teachers' teaching has saddled them. My own answer is that if those other vices render them such that they believe non-evidentially, then they can and should be regarded as having been indoctrinated. I acknowledge Callan and Arena's helpful distinction between close-mindedness and other vices, including those of credulity and sloth. But I am not persuaded, by appeal either to intuitions or ordinary usage, that open-minded but non-evidential believers cannot rightly be described as victims of indoctrination. The only reason for preferring my account that I have offered is that of theoretical unification, and I concede that this reason is not sufficient to settle the matter. I look forward to further exploration of the issue by both Callan and Arena and others.

I end in praise of both open-mindedness and critical thinking.¹⁰

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Notes

¹ I must acknowledge that I have quoted this sentence misleadingly; it appears simply as the antecedent of a conditional statement. It is actually difficult to find a straightforward, unqualified statement of Callan and Arena's positive view – that indoctrination is teaching that brings about close-minded belief – in their paper. Still, there is no question that that is their positive view. So I hope I can be forgiven this misleading quotation. It is worth noting that their view echoes Hare's: "[T]o be indoctrinated is to have a closed mind." (Hare 1979, p. x)

² "[I]ndoctrination, insofar as it is a matter of fostering a non-evidential style of belief, is anti-critical. There is a deep, although obvious, connection between style of belief and critical thinking. A person who has an evidential style of belief has a disposition to seek reasons and evidence, and to believe on that basis; and this, we have seen, is a central component of critical thinking. A person with a non-evidential style of belief, on the other hand, lacks this key feature of critical thinking." (Siegel 1988, pp. 87-8)

³ Callan and Arena gently chastise me (note 7, pp. 34-5) for urging that "Indoctrination may be regarded as the collection of those modes of belief inculcation which foster a non-evidential, or *non-critical*, style of belief" (quoting from Siegel 1988, p. 80, emphasis in original), on the grounds that some such modes may result in defects other than close-mindedness: "Credulity and intellectual sloth may prevent critical inquiry and nourish non-evidential styles of belief, but they are not the same as close-mindedness, and therefore, the teaching that produces them is not the same as indoctrination." (p. 34)

I certainly agree that credulity and intellectual sloth are different intellectual vices than that of close-mindedness, and am happy to grant that point. But its bearing on the question at issue – i.e., whether indoctrination is best understood in terms of close-mindedness or critical thinking/non-evidential style of belief – is unclear, and it should be pointed out that as it stands the point seems clearly enough to presuppose, rather than constitute an independent reason for, their view that indoctrination is a matter of close-mindedness. I return to this matter below.

⁴ In the language of the account of critical thinking put forward in *Educating Reason*, chapter two, does it include mastery of the ‘reason assessment’ component of critical thinking? That is, does it involve the ability “to assess reasons and their ability to warrant beliefs, claims and actions *properly*”? (Siegel 1988, p. 34, emphasis added) It is also worth pointing out that critical thinking involves not just the competent evaluation of reasons already available, but also the dispositions to so evaluate, and to seek and produce further reasons, evidence and arguments relevant to candidate beliefs. I won’t develop this point further here.

⁵ Several of Hare’s discussions do in fact suggest that at least some minimal competence in reason assessment is necessary for open-mindedness. See, e.g., Hare 1979, p. 79; Hare 2001, p. 42; Hare 2003, p. 79; Hare 2007, p. 22. I am grateful to Hare for his help and usual insightfulness on this and related matters.

⁶ It is perhaps worth noting that Callan and Arena appear to agree (p. 31).

⁷ Hare makes a closely related point – that open-mindedness is a necessary condition of “a concern for truth” – in Hare 1979, pp. 60-61.

⁸ See, e.g., Siegel 1988, p. 37. I have referred only to *Educating Reason* here. Many of the points mentioned thus far are further developed in Siegel 1997 and other publications.

⁹ The previous several pages have proceeded from my reading of Hare as holding that open-mindedness is not dependent on matters of epistemic quality; that one can believe open-mindedly but badly. Suppose this reading of Hare, and this understanding of open-mindedness, is mistaken. Suppose, that is – as was suggested by several commentators, notably Christopher Higgins and Hare himself – that in order to reason and believe open-mindedly, one’s reasoning and believing must comport at least minimally with relevant epistemic standards, so that open-mindedness involves at least partial mastery of the reason assessment component of critical thinking?

This understanding of open-mindedness is at odds not only with Hare’s standard account of the notion, but with ordinary usage as well, since we do in fact (in English, at least) routinely attribute open-mindedness to people independently of their ratiocinative abilities and inclinations. Hare’s groundbreaking analysis seems to establish this clearly and compellingly.

In conversation and correspondence after the presentation of an earlier version of this paper (see note 10 below for details), Hare has effectively reminded me that on his considered view open-mindedness requires at least a minimal competence with respect to

reason assessment. (See references in note 5 above.) Indeed, on Hare's considered view, open-mindedness and at-least-minimal-competence-with-respect-to-reason-assessment are necessary conditions of each other, and are "importantly intertwined" (as I have described the inter-relationship between rationality and objectivity in Siegel 1999 and (with Alven Neiman) somewhat more expansively in Neiman and Siegel 1993). I have no serious objection to this way of looking at the relation between open-mindedness and critical thinking. But I would point out that at long as the competence involved is genuinely minimal, my claim that critical thinking is the more fundamental ideal seems to stand, in that one could on this view of the matter be fully open-minded and yet only minimally competent as a critical thinker, thus meeting the first but failing to meet the second. I would also point out that building minimal reason assessment competence into the definition of open-mindedness seems a fairly substantial change from what I called above Hare's 'official account' of the notion. Thanks to Higgins and especially Hare for correspondence that prompted this note.

¹⁰ I was fortunate to present a version of this paper at the recent conference in honor of Hare's retirement, 'Open-mindedness and the Virtues in Education: Conference Celebrating the Work of Professor William Hare', at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, October 2-4 2008. I am grateful to the audience members for their helpful questions, comments and suggestions, and to Bill Hare for his insightful reactions and exceptional grace.