

Can Closed-mindedness be an Intellectual Virtue?

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I. A Paradigm Case of Closed-Mindedness

Many of us know someone like Paul. Paul believes that people who commit crimes are simply irredeemable. He thinks they are broken human beings who can't be fixed. Paul has stuck with these beliefs throughout his life, and is unwilling to engage seriously with ideas or evidence to the contrary: he summarily dismisses any competing ideas that cross his path without evaluating their merits. Accordingly, when the conversation turns to educating the incarcerated, Paul deems it ridiculous and shuts down, closing himself off. When he sees an article supporting reentry programs, he thinks it silly and scrolls past it. Paul recognizes that such ideas compete with his own, and rejects them because they seem implausible. In short, Paul is closed-minded, at least when it comes to this issue.

II. What is closed-mindedness, and is it always an intellectual vice?

- A. I adopt a working analysis of closed-mindedness as an unwillingness or inability to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options.
- B. Paul has one familiar species of closed-mindedness: he is dogmatic. He is unwilling to engage seriously with relevant alternatives to a belief he already holds.
- C. The disposition of CM is an intellectual vice in standard cases.
- D. CM is not always an intellectual vice, and can even be an intellectual virtue.
 1. There are one-off instances of closed-minded action that are intellectually virtuous.
 2. The disposition of CM can be an intellectual virtue in epistemically hostile environments.

III. Working Analyses of Closed-mindedness and Dogmatism

Paul is unwilling to engage seriously with alternatives to his belief that 'once a criminal, always a criminal.' Dismissing relevant alternatives to a belief is one way to be closed-minded, but it isn't the only way. Closed-mindedness is broader: (CM) it is an unwillingness or inability to engage (seriously) with relevant intellectual options. 4 features of Paul's case **not** necessary for closed-mindedness.

- (A) **Having beliefs about the topic.** CM does not *require* already having beliefs about a topic. Pauline who has no beliefs about this topic and is being confronted with evidence for the first time. She can still arrive at an initial belief by conducting a closed-minded inquiry; she may ignore or be oblivious to evidence that supports the success of reentry programs. CM doesn't require having extant beliefs about the given topic; but DG does. Paul is both closed-minded and dogmatic; Pauline is closed-minded but not dogmatic.
- (B) **The locus of ideas and evidence.** Paul is closed-minded with respect to ideas and evidence that compete with a belief he already holds. Pauline is closed-minded in the way that she handles ideas and evidence in arriving at a belief. But, one can also be closed-minded in the ways that one conducts inquiries more generally. One can be closed-minded with respect to which questions one asks, which sources one consults, and which methods one uses. The locus of closed-mindedness isn't *restricted* to ideas and evidence. Its locus will also include other intellectual options: relevant questions, sources, and methods. Ditto for DG.
- (C) **Engaging with intellectual options.** In dismissing intellectual options that cross his path, Paul engages with those options, at least insofar as he recognizes and rejects them. Paul doesn't engage seriously with these options—he doesn't evaluate the merits of competing ideas. His engagement is entirely superficial. But, CM and DG don't even require this much, one can be CM or DG by **failing** (in various ways) to engage with intellectual options:
 - (1) one might **ignore** (rather than dismiss) intellectual options.
 - (2) one might be **oblivious** to intellectual options—being oblivious to relevant sources can take the form of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007).
 - (3) **failing to seek out** options, failing to look beyond one's echo chamber.

(D) **Unwillingness.** Paul is unwilling to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options. This willful refusal to engage (seriously) is required for dogmatism. But, it isn't required for the broader category of CM. One can be closed-minded by being unable, albeit willing, to engage with intellectual options.

- (1) Our environments can make us closed-minded even when we don't want to be closed-minded!
- (2) People who are unable to engage with intellectual options because of bad luck (in environments or constitutions) count as CM, though they won't be blameworthy (in voluntarist sense) for coming to possess CM. As an inability, CM can be an environmentally-produced impairment, or can result from a hard-wired impairment.

(E) **Key point:** (CM) is an unwillingness or inability to engage (or engage seriously) with relevant intellectual options. Dogmatism is a sub-set of closed-mindedness: (DG) it is an unwillingness to engage (seriously) with relevant alternatives to a belief one already holds.

- (1) the examples above feature beliefs that are false, one can also be closed-minded and dogmatic with respect to beliefs that are **true**.
- (2) an agent's closed-mindedness might be restricted to a particular domain. She may have a **domain-specific disposition** to be closed-minded, but lack the **general disposition**. It is also possible for an agent to perform a closed-minded **action** as a one-off, without having a disposition to be CM.

(F) CM and DG are defined in terms of **relevant** intellectual options.

- (1) What are the conditions on relevance? **Externalists:** relevant/irrelevant options are objectively likely/unlikely to be true. **Internalists:** options that the agent has good reason to believe are likely/unlikely to be true.
- (2) Whether we are internalists or externalists, intellectual options like '2+2=5', 'The Holocaust never happened', and 'The earth is flat' will be *irrelevant* in ordinary environments—since these options are in fact false, and we believe reliably, and with good reason, that they are false. In ordinary environments we aren't closed-minded in ignoring these options b/c they aren't relevant.
- (3) **Pervasiveness condition.** The widespread presence or absence of an option in an environment suffices to make that option relevant or irrelevant.

(a) **Against pervasiveness.** On the one hand, we have reason to think that the absence of an option in the agent's environment is not enough to make it irrelevant to her inquiry. Orwell: Ministry of Truth re-writes options, destroys facts that conflict w/party line. Arguably, the facts that it destroys are still relevant options for agents conducting inquiries. The epistemic environment in 1984 makes its subjects *more* closed-minded, not less. It doesn't *decrease* the number of relevant options; it makes them harder to access.

(b) **For pervasiveness.** On the other hand, we have reason to think that the ubiquity of an option in an environment makes it relevant. Return to Oceania—an environment thoroughly polluted with 'alternative facts'. Arguably, the ubiquitous presence of such options makes them relevant to the agent's inquiry in the same way that the widespread presence of fake barns makes that option relevant. The option that a barn was fake wasn't relevant until one stumbled into fake barn country, where it became relevant and stayed relevant, even though the agent's beliefs—'That's a barn'—are true. Likewise, the option that 'ignorance is strength' wasn't relevant until one woke up in Oceania, where it became relevant and stayed relevant, even though the agent's beliefs—'Ignorance is not strength'—are true.

- (4) Key issue: in ordinary environments, options like ‘The earth is flat’, ‘2+2=5’, and ‘The Holocaust never happened’ are not relevant; we aren’t closed-minded in ignoring them. But, *if* the pervasiveness condition proves viable, then in epistemically hostile environments, options like ‘2+2=5’ will be relevant, and we will be closed-minded in ignoring them.

IV. Intellectual Vices

- A. Intellectual vices are cognitive dispositions that make us bad thinkers. There is more than one way for cognitive dispositions to make us bad thinkers; more than one kind of intellectual vice.
- B. **Effects-vices.** Cognitive dispositions produce a preponderance of bad epistemic effects (including, but not limited to, false beliefs), or prevent us from achieving good epistemic effects. Dispositions can be effects-vices whether or not they involve bad epistemic character.
- C. **Responsibilist-vices.** A disposition could also (or instead) involve bad epistemic character—bad epistemic motives and values—for which the agent is blameworthy.
- D. **Personalist-vices.** Involves bad epistemic character—bad epistemic motives and values—for which the agent is *not* blameworthy (in the voluntarist sense). E.g. indoctrinated Hitler youth.
- E. In standard cases like Paul’s, CM is an intellectual vice. At a minimum, it meets the conditions for an effects-vice, and may also meet the conditions for a responsibilist-vice or a personalist-vice.

V. Closed-mindedness as an Effects-vice

- A. **Bad epistemic effects for the closed-minded agent himself.**
 - (1) **Sustaining and strengthening false beliefs.** CM enables the agent who possesses it to sustain false beliefs that he already has. Paul’s CM enables him to sustain a false belief. Similarly, in failing to look for sources outside our own epistemic bubbles, we may be sustaining false beliefs that we already have. Repeated agreement among ‘friends’ in our bubbles may even lead us to mistakenly strengthen our confidence in our beliefs.
 - (2) **Prevent the agent from acquiring true beliefs and knowledge.** Paul’s CM prevents him from acquiring true beliefs about whether incarcerated people can change. Also: consider an agent who gets *all* of his news from Facebook, and who fails to look for *any* other relevant sources. If his feed exhibits gaps in news coverage, then his failure to seek out alternatives will prevent him from gaining true beliefs about some events.
 - (3) **Compound and expand an agent’s extant system of false beliefs.** It can lead agents to **doxastically ‘double-down.’** Samuel A. Cartwright, 19th century white American doctor who believed that slaves lacked agency. When confronted with contrary evidence, (attempts to escape slavery), Cartwright ‘doubled down’: he judged escape attempts to be manifestations of a mental disorder peculiar to slaves, which he simply made up.
 - (4) Relatedly, CM can lead agents to **pursue irrelevant questions, projects, and inquiries**, and to waste their epistemic resources and amass epistemic opportunity costs. E.g., a dogmatic climate denier might set out to study the benefits of burning coal.
- B. **Bad epistemic effects for other agents.**
 - (5) **Credibility deficit.** In being closed-minded with respect to sources, one might fail to see another agent as a source of knowledge when she is, assigning her a “credibility deficit.” (Fricker 2007: 27) The harm done by a single instance of such CM may be ephemeral. But, CM can take the form of testimonial injustice, whereby the closed-minded agent systematically overlooks the credibility of women and people of color.
 - (6) **Impede the development of intellectual virtues.** People whose credibility is repeatedly denied or overlooked, may come to doubt their own intellectual strengths. This can impede their ability to develop virtues like intellectual pride (they may under-own their strengths) and facilitate the vice of intellectual servility.
 - (7) **Epistemic exclusion and obstruction.** CM that takes the form of testimonial injustice can also result in the exclusion of women and people of color from educational institutions, and obstruct their acquisition of knowledge.

- (8) **Credibility Excess.** The closed-minded agent who fails to look for sources outside his own epistemic bubble may also assign too *much* credibility to his ‘friends’. He may see them as sources of knowledge when they are not.
- (9) **Epistemic Corruption.** CM agents who have the power to set the intellectual agenda for others—school boards, journalists, governmental agencies (EPA)—can create conditions that facilitate closed-mindedness in others. Kidd: their CM can be “epistemically corrupting”: it can “encourage the development and exercise of epistemic vices.”

C. Bad Epistemic Effects for the Environment

- (10) **Epistemic pollution.** Closed-mindedness can lead to the intentional or unintentional pollution of the epistemic environment. Closed-minded agents who pursue irrelevant inquiries and do so sincerely, e.g., ‘true believers’ like Cartwright, can unintentionally disseminate falsehoods in their environments. Closed-minded agents who re-post the claims of their ‘friends’ without seeking independent corroboration, can likewise populate their feeds with unwitting falsehoods.
- (11) **Obfuscating truths and knowledge.** By inadvertently polluting their epistemic environments with false claims, these closed-minded agents may also be obfuscating truths and knowledge, making them harder to find.
- (12) **Pollution will be a matter of degree:** the wider the dissemination of falsehoods, the more polluted the environment; at extreme levels of saturation, polluted environments will be hostile.

D. Does the disposition of CM produce a *preponderance* of bad epistemic effects?

- (1) In ordinary environments like ours,¹ the disposition of CM (usually) meets the conditions of an effects-vice. It leads to a heap of bad epistemic effects!
- (2) CM may even meet the conditions for an effects-vice when the belief one is being closed-minded about is *true*. Suppose I believe that my pet is well-behaved, and that this is true but doesn’t constitute knowledge. In refusing to engage with relevant evidence to the contrary, I am ignoring options that are false. CM enables me to sustain a true belief. But, in ignoring these options I am not engaging with them seriously—I am not evaluating them on their merits. Accordingly, I may be sustaining a true belief while blocking my ability to gain knowledge or understanding. Here, too, CM may obstruct the acquisition of knowledge. Thus: Even at our most conservative, we can conclude that CM sometimes, perhaps often, fails to produce a preponderance of epistemic goods.

VI. Closed-mindedness as an Effects-Virtue: One-Off Instances of CM Actions in Ordinary Environments.

(A) Is CM with respect to knowledge you already possess virtuous? Sosa on Kripke’s Dogmatism

Paradox: “Once you know that p, you can deduce...that any evidence contrary to p would be misleading, whereas positive evidence would probably do you little good. After all, by hypothesis you already know that p! Given this, you should close your mind to any new potential evidence to the question whether p. If positive, the evidence will do little for you; if negative, it will harmfully pull you away from the truth, and may even cost you the knowledge that you have.”²

- (1) Does CM enable the agent to sustain her knowledge, and prevent her from devoting epistemic resources to relevant but ultimately misguided options? Do these instances of closed-minded action produce an overall preponderance of good epistemic effects?
- (2) **The jury is still out.** Ignoring options that are relevant but misguided will prevent the agent from devoting resources to those options, thus freeing up those resources for more promising epistemic pursuits. It will also preserve her true belief that p. The question is whether it causes her to lose her knowledge that p. Cassam (ms) thinks it does, Fantl (2013)

¹ Whether an epistemic environment will be ordinary or hostile is a matter of degree. It is also possible for a single agent to occupy different epistemic environments, some of which are hostile and others of which are ordinary. I think that many of us in the contemporary US can still find some (relatively) ordinary environments to occupy, though this might take some looking and might be harder for some agents than others.

² Sosa. 2014. “Knowledge and Time: Kripke’s Dogmatism Paradox and the Ethics of Belief” in Matheson and Vitz *The Ethics of Belief* OUP: 78

thinks it doesn't, and Sosa (2014) takes the road between. Cassam: when an agent is confronted with relevant evidence against *p*, which she can't refute and closed-mindedly dismisses, she loses her justification for *p* and thus loses her knowledge. In direct contrast, Fantl: the agent can sometimes retain her knowledge that *p* when she dismisses a relevant counterargument that she can't refute. Sosa: the agent retains her animal knowledge that *p*, but is prevented from having reflective knowledge that *p*.

(3) It is an open question as to whether CM wrt knowledge produces a *preponderance* of good epistemic effects. We can also conclude that *if* knowledge is lost rather than preserved, then CM with respect to knowledge won't be a clear advance on CM with respect to unjustified true belief (e.g., that my pet is well-behaved). And, so, if closed-mindedness with respect to unjustified true belief fails to produce a preponderance of good epistemic effects (as argued above), so will closed-mindedness with respect to knowledge.

(B) **Might the closed-minded action of a group-member be virtuous?** Might it contribute to the production of epistemic goods by the group as a whole?

(1) **The jury is still out.** But, Hookway (2003: 189) is optimistic. Relatedly, it is worth considering whether a group composed entirely of closed-minded agents might produce a preponderance of epistemic goods. Morton (2014: 171) and Fricker are optimistic.

(C) Think about the most recent article you wrote, or about what it took to actually start *writing* your dissertation. At some point, you likely ignored relevant options, in order to focus on developing your own answer—not because it was your own, but because it was *the answer!* Because you thought it was true. You stopped reading alternative views—you tuned them out. You knew that another article had just been published on your topic, but you ignored it, in an effort to make progress on the solution you thought was correct. According to (CM), this behavior is closed-minded.

(1) **There will be some cases where this produces a preponderance of good epistemic effects;** e.g., where researchers on the verge of a big discovery ignore relevant (but different) work that has just been published in order to push forward and successfully complete their own line of inquiry. They may even (causally) *need* to ignore that work in order to make their discovery. The goods produced are epistemic—the researchers produce knowledge. The method is epistemic—they push forward in their own inquiry. Their motives are epistemic—they are motivated to attain knowledge. So, the values in play are epistemic and not (not merely) pragmatic.

(2) Granted, some cases of ignoring relevant options will produce a preponderance of *merely* pragmatic goods, or moral goods, but not epistemic goods.

(a) When closed-mindedly avoiding inquiries into one's own health, and sustaining the false belief that one is fine, actually helps one heal.

(b) The graduating senior who waits until the last minute to write a term paper. He addresses only two sources, ignoring others and closing off his inquiry in order to meet the deadline.

(c) Tough case. Suppose I have promised a friend that I will make pavlova for her party tomorrow. Having never made it before, I read the recipes of 20 celebrity bakers. I ignore the remaining 10 mil recipes turned up by Google and close off my inquiry, in order to keep my promise and get the pavlova done.

VII. The Disposition of CM as an Effects-Virtue in Hostile Environments

Could the disposition of CV be a "burdened" virtue of sorts—a disposition that is only useful for surviving in environments that are hostile or oppressive? (Tessman 2005)

(1) Set-up: Assume, for the sake of argument, that the Pervasiveness condition on relevant options holds. The widespread presence of an intellectual option in an environment will suffice to make that option relevant. Suppose that an epistemically *hostile* environment is not minimally or moderately polluted, but extremely polluted—it is utterly saturated with intellectual options that are false or unreliable. Some of these options will be explicit statements ('ignorance is strength'), some will be unreliable sources (the dimwits in *Idiocracy*), some will be implicit norms (that

discredit women and people of color as sources of knowledge). The pervasiveness condition renders these options *relevant*.

- (2) Question: So, **what is a knowledge-possessing agent to do when she wakes up in an epistemically hostile environment?** (Orwell's Oceania, Mike Judge's Idiocracy)
- (3) My proposal: **epistemically, she should be closed-minded**—she should be unwilling to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options that conflict with what she already knows. That is, if she knows that, e.g., '2+2=4', 'ignorance is not strength', and 'the earth is round,' then she should be unwilling to engage seriously with the options that, e.g., '2+2=5', 'ignorance is strength,' and 'the earth is flat.'
- (4) **Why should she be closed-minded? Because, in an epistemically hostile environment, CM is an effects-virtue.** When a knowledge-possessing agent is stuck in an epistemically hostile environment, surrounded by falsehoods, dimwits, and distractions, CM about options that conflict with what she knows will minimize the production of bad epistemic effects for *her*.
 - (a) First, it will enable her to sustain the true beliefs she already has. That is one good, and it is not insignificant—there is considerable risk of her coming to believe what the Ministry of Truth wants her to believe.
 - (b) Second, CM will prevent her from devoting epistemic resources to options that are relevant (due to pervasiveness) but misguided, and from amassing epistemic opportunity costs. It thus frees up those resources for more promising epistemic pursuits; it enables her to continue to pursue her own intellectual projects and options. That is a second good.
- (5) Some agents (members of non-dominant groups) don't have to imagine being in an epistemically hostile environment. They already live in one. CM might be an especially important resource for members of non-dominant groups. It will enable agents to hold onto their true beliefs, avert epistemic opportunity costs, pursue their own intellectual projects, ward off servility.
- (6) One important unanswered question: do closed-minded agents in epistemically hostile environments retain their knowledge? Hostile environments compound this problem because they are unsafe; i.e. they are environments in which any agent—closed-minded or not—could easily go wrong when revisiting her belief. In short, hostile environments may themselves rob an agent of knowledge. If so, can the agent somehow inoculate himself against this unsafe environment by being closed-minded? Alternatively, suppose the agent retains his knowledge despite his unsafe environment. Does his closed-mindedness then cause him to lose his knowledge? Whatever conclusions we draw, I submit that in epistemically hostile environments, the disposition of closed-mindedness still succeeds in minimizing bad epistemic effects for the agent himself, even if it doesn't produce an outright preponderance of good epistemic effects for the agent. In such environments, we may have to sacrifice knowledge in order to avoid even worse epistemic effects. Such is the power of hostile environments.
- (7) **Does the closed-mindedness of the knowledge-possessing agent minimize bad epistemic effects for other agents in the hostile environment?** One might worry that it does not: in order to minimize bad epistemic effects for deluded others (e.g. Idiocracy), the knowledge-possessing agent should be somewhat open-minded: even if she is ultimately unwilling to revise her *own* beliefs (2+2=4), she should still engage seriously with deluded or incompetent others and the options they endorse in an effort to change *their* minds.
- (8) In reply:
 - (a) by engaging seriously with the fabrications of the Ministry of Truth, or with the dimwits of the Idiocracy, the knowledge-possessing agent would be amassing epistemic opportunity costs for herself instead of making progress on her own intellectual projects. She would be sacrificing her own intellectual agenda, and for what? If deluded or incompetent others were unlikely or unable to be convinced, her sacrifice would be futile.
 - (b) in engaging seriously with deluded others and the fabrications they endorse, our knowledge-possessing agent might be **doing them a disservice**. She might be inflating their

epistemic credibility, or at least signaling to them that they are credible enough to be taken seriously, though they aren't. Medina (2013) and Fricker (2007) both argue that credibility excess can impede virtue development and facilitate the development of intellectual vices like arrogance and closed-mindedness.

- (c) in engaging seriously with deluded others and the fabrications they endorse, the knowledge-possessing agent would be an inadvertent epistemic polluter. In arguing against the fabrications of the Ministry of Truth, she would still be repeating those fabrications and disseminating them in the epistemic environment—she would be giving them air-time. By adding to the din of fabrications, she might even be inadvertently obfuscating her knowledge, making it harder, not easier, for others to find. In other words, she might be **making the epistemic environment worse**, not better.
 - (d) in inflating the credibility of deluded others and in continuing (albeit inadvertently) to pollute the epistemic environment, our knowledge-possessing agent may contribute to facilitating intellectual vice in others. Despite her best intentions, her serious engagement with deluded others and the fabrications they endorse may be epistemically corrupting.
- (9) In sum: in an epistemically hostile environment, closed-mindedness on the part of the knowledge-possessing agent would minimize bad epistemic effects for the agent herself, for other agents, and for the environment. That is enough to make it an effects-virtue—at least a burdened effects-virtue in a hostile epistemic environment.
- (10) Caveats
- (a) I am not arguing that the knowledge-possessing agent in a hostile environment should be closed-minded in *every* domain or possess the *general* disposition of closed-mindedness. Rather, I am arguing that she should be closed-minded about relevant intellectual options that conflict with what she already knows. That will cover *many* domains, since the environment is hostile. Still, she can be largely *open*-minded in the way she conducts her own intellectual projects or her projects with epistemically reliable allies.
 - (b) Nor must she give up open-mindedness as a valued goal for herself or the environment. Even if she can't make her hostile environment more open-minded by being an exemplar of open-mindedness herself—by engaging seriously with deluded others and the fabrications they endorse—she may try to facilitate open-mindedness in other ways.
 - (c) I am not arguing that morally, pragmatically, or politically, the knowledge-possessing agent should be closed-minded. Rather, I am merely arguing that epistemically, she should be closed-minded. Closed-mindedness on the part of the knowledge-possessing agent minimizes bad *epistemic* effects for the agent herself, other agents, and the environment. If closed-mindedness produces bad moral, pragmatic, and political effects in hostile environments, those will need to be weighed against (and might trump) its epistemic effects.
 - (d) I advise caution in any attempts to apply the claims above to our current epistemic environment.

Conclusion: in standard cases, including Paul's, the disposition of closed-mindedness is an intellectual vice. But, closed-mindedness can be intellectually virtuous. In ordinary environments, some one-off instances of closed-minded action will produce a preponderance of good epistemic effects. Moreover, in epistemically hostile environments, the disposition of closed-mindedness will be an effects-virtue, albeit a burdened one.